KISS-AND-RUN BANDIT by ART LAWSON

RANGELAND ROMANCES

MAR.

25¢

TEMPTING LITTLE TENDERFOOT!
by THELMA KNOLES

SEVERN · ABBOTT

JAN 24 1952

• ROMANCES OF THE OLD FRONTIER •

MAR. 1952 RANGELAND ROMANCES

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FREE! SELLING OUTFIT

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My Professional Selling Outfit contains cut-away demonstrator so your customers can *feel* the restful Velvet-eez Air Cushion innersole. Special accurate measuring device—National Advertising reprints—door opener kits—the actual shoes—Everything you need to build a profitable repeat business. Here's your chance! Join me and get into the BIG MONEY!

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Add more profits selling top quality horsehide, capeskin, suede, nylon, gabardine, and other popular leather jackets. Also raincoats. EVERY OUTDOOR MAN A PROSPECT FOR THESE STURDY, HANDSOME GARMENTS. STYLED AND TAILORED BY EXPERTS.

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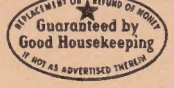
The Good Housekeeping Magazine Guarantee Seal on Velvet-eez shoes opens doors for you and clinches sales.



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Combined with
WESTERN LOVE ROMANCES

Volume Fifty | March, 1952 | Number Four

Rollicking Old-West Romance

KISS-AND-RUN BANDIT ..... **Art Lawson** 14
Florence couldn't let that notorious badman get away—without another kiss.

Stirring Novelettes of the Range

FOR THE LOVE OF MIKE ..... **A. C. Abbott** 52
She didn't know how much she loved her crazy horse-hunter—until a whole posse got on his trail.

TEMPTING LITTLE TENDERFOOT! ..... **Thelma Knoles** 90
What difference did it make if Timmie couldn't rope a cow—as long as she lassoed her man!

Sparkling Western Love Stories

CORRAL ME A BRIDE! ..... **Bill Severn** 30
Her choice was simple: be Wade's bride—or find him another as pretty as Sherry!

HONEY OF A SADDLE-PARD ..... **Dee Dunsing** 44
It took a heap of doing for Lora to show her cowboy she wasn't too young to love.
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THE COWGIRL AND THE NESTER ..... **Hascal Giles** 72
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EVER-LOVING LOBO ..... **Darlene du Bois** 80
The kidnapper was a handsome hombre—and the ransom he asked was one heart.

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Next Issue Will Be Published March 5th.

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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Please send me, without obligation, details about your "3c A Day Hospitalization Insurance Plan."

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TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

Recipes for parties and large groups.

PARADISE SALAD

is not only delicious but is one of the dishes children are almost sure to like. *For twelve servings,* make following amount:

Shred enough cabbage to make 2½ cups when shredded. Wash but do not peel apples. Cut in quarters, core and dice enough for 2½ cups. Pit enough stewed, dried prunes to make 1½ cups when cut in pieces with scissors or knife. Wash and drain thoroughly 1 cup raisins. Mix above ingredients, plus ½ cup nuts or chopped, raw carrots, with ¾ cup cooked salad dressing. (See below.)

COOKED DRESSING

Mix 1 teaspoon salt, 1 teaspoon dry mustard, 2 tablespoons flour and 2 tablespoons sugar. Beat 1 egg or 2 egg yolks and add to flour mixture. Stir in 1 cup evaporated milk and cook over boiling water until mixture thickens, stirring constantly. Remove from heat, cool slightly and stir in ¼ cup vinegar. If the dressing is too thick, thin with evaporated milk or a little more vinegar. This amount makes 1½ cups. Any left over may be kept in ice box for later use.

(Continued on page 8)

You Practice COMMUNICATIONS

I send you parts to build this transmitter

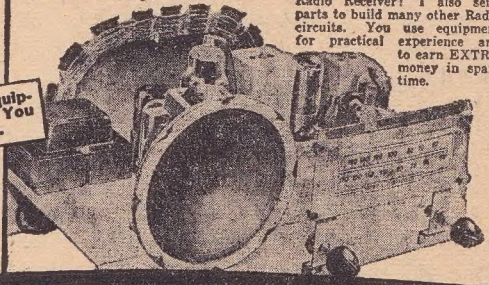
As part of my Communications Course you build this low power broadcasting transmitter, learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many tests.

This is just part of the equipment my students build. You keep all parts I send.

You Practice Radio SERVICING

on this modern radio you build with parts I send

As part of my Servicing Course, I send you the speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, EVERYTHING you need to build this modern, powerful Radio Receiver! I also send parts to build many other Radio circuits. You use equipment for practical experience and to earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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Learn Servicing or Communications Practice at Home in Spare Time

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute

Do you want good pay, a job with a bright future and security? Would you like to have a profitable shop or store of your own? If so, find out how you can realize your ambition in the fast growing, prosperous RADIO-TELEVISION industry. Even without Television, the industry is bigger than ever before. 30 million home and auto Radios, 3100 Broadcasting Stations, expanding use of Aviation and Police Radio, Micro-wave Relay, Two-way Radio for buses, taxis, etc., are making opportunities for Servicing and Communications Technicians and FCC-Licensed Operators.

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In 1950, over 5,000,000 TV sets sold. By 1954, 25,000,000 TV sets estimated. Over 100 TV Stations now operating. Authorities predict 1,000 TV Stations. This means more jobs, good pay for qualified men all over the United States and Canada.

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Send Now For 2 Books FREE—Mail Coupon

Send now for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. You get actual Servicing lesson to show you how you learn at home. Also my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Read what my graduates are doing, earning; see equipment you practice with at home. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2BRI, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 38th Year.

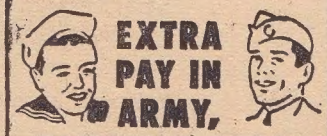
I TRAINED THESE MEN

"I have been operating my own Servicing business. In two years I did $14,000 worth of business; net profit $6,350. Have one full time employee, an NRI student."—PHILLIP G. BROGAN, Louisville, Ky.

"Four years ago, I was a bookkeeper, with a hand-to-mouth salary. Now I am a Radio Engineer with a key station of the American Broadcasting Company network."—NORMAN H. WARD, Ridgefield Park, New Jersey.

"When halfway through the NRI course, I made $5 to $8 a week fixing sets in my spare time. Am now selling and installing Television sets and antennas."—E. J. STREITENBERGER, New Boston, O.

"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief Engineer of Police Radio Station WQOX. I never hesitate to endorse NRI."—T. S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio.



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Address.....

City..... Zone..... State.....

Approved for training under G. I. Bill

(Continued from page 6)

COTTAGE CHEESE SALAD

may be served on a ring of pineapple or as a garnish on a cold plate. Heat 1½ pints chili sauce and 1 teaspoon of salt to boiling. Stir in ¼ cup unflavored gelatine that has been softened in ½ pint cold water. Chill until mixture starts to thicken. Mix 1½ quarts (3 pounds) of cottage cheese with 4 cups of evaporated milk. Stir the chili sauce mixture into cheese and milk. Pour into individual molds which have been rinsed with cold water, or a square cake pan. Chill until firm and turn out of molds or cut into squares. This salad may be prepared early in the day and kept in cold place.

SAUSAGE WITH CREAM GRAVY

This is fine served at a picnic where you have outdoor cooking facilities. Shape 3 pounds of sausage meat into patties, allowing 3 tablespoons of the meat to a patty. Fry slowly until browned but not hard. Turn and brown other side. Remove from fat. Measure off ⅓ cup fat for gravy. Blend with ½ cup of flour. Add 1½ pints boiling water, stirring constantly. Boil until gravy commences to thicken. Add 3⅓ cups of evaporated milk and the patties. Continue to cook until gravy is nicely thickened and the sausage hot. Serve on hot rolls, biscuits or toast, or on mashed potatoes if you like. *Serves twelve.*

SOUTHWESTERN SANDWICH

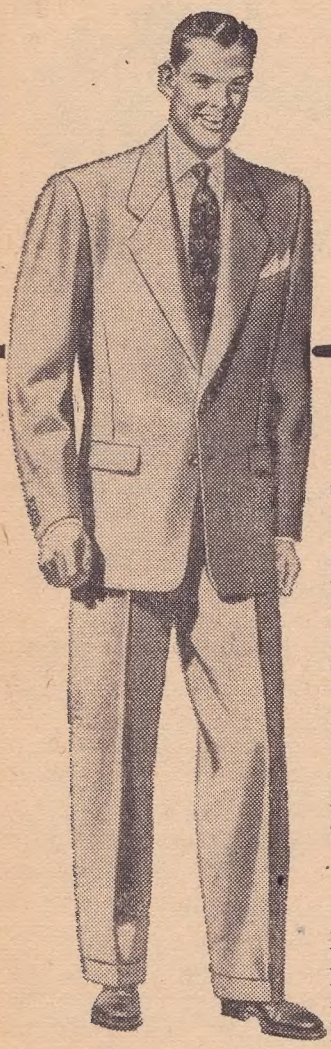
You can divide this in half for a small group. Brown 2 pounds of ground beef in a little fat. Add 3 cups chopped onion, 1½ cups chopped celery, 1½ cups chopped green pepper. Cook until tender. Stir in 2 ten-ounce cans of tomato soup, 1 tablespoon of barbecue sauce, 2 teaspoons of salt and pepper to taste. Simmer for thirty minutes. Serve with a crisp onion ring to each bunful.

SPAGHETTI WITH MEAT SAUCE

Make a kettle the previous day. In a large kettle put 1 cup salad or cooking oil. Add 1 cup minced onion and simmer for 5 minutes. Then add 4 pounds of ground chuck beef and 8 minced and peeled garlic cloves. Then cook, stirring until the meat is slightly browned. Add 6 three-ounce cans sliced mushrooms with their liquid, 1 cup minced parsley, 2 cups sliced, stuffed olives, 4 eight-ounce cans of tomatoes. First force the tomatoes through a sieve. Lastly add 2 level tablespoons salt, 2 teaspoons pepper and 2 teaspoons sugar. Cover and simmer one hour. Uncover, cook two hours very slowly, stirring occasionally. Cool and chill. About two hours before serving, cook 6 pounds of spaghetti in 4 gallons of boiling water to which 3 level tablespoons salt have been added. When tender (twenty to twenty-five minutes) drain in colander. Meanwhile heat sauce, adding 1 pound sharp American cheese diced. Stir occasionally until cheese has melted and sauce is hot. Serve over the spaghetti with grated Parmesian cheese. *Twenty-five servings.*

In planning for party feeds it's well to remember that women are pleased with unusual dishes or odd methods of serving them. Men are interested in plenty of food and prefer the plain, hearty dishes. For a mixed crowd keep the men in mind for the main part, but add something out of the ordinary to tempt the ladies—and you'll be a hit with both.

I need 500 Men to wear SAMPLE SUITS!



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My values in made-to-measure suits are so sensational, thousands of men order when they see the actual garments. I make it easy for you to get your own suit to wear and show—and to MAKE MONEY IN FULL OR SPARE TIME! MY PLAN IS AMAZING! Just take a few orders at my low money-saving prices—that's all! Get your own personal suit, and make money fast taking orders. You need no experience. You need no money now or any time. Just rush your name and address for complete facts and BIG SAMPLE KIT containing more than 100 actual woolen samples. It's FREE! Get into the big-pay tailoring field and earn up to $15.00 in a day! Many men are earning even more! You can begin at once in spare time to take orders and pocket big profits. All you do is show the big, colorful different styles. Men order quickly because you offer fine quality at unbeatable prices. Yes—superb made-to-measure cutting and sewing—and complete satisfaction guaranteed. It's easy to get first orders, but repeat orders come even easier. With my big, complete line you begin earning big money at once and you build a steady, big-profit repeat business at the same time.

No Experience—No Money Needed
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We supply everything—sample fabrics, full-color style cards, order forms, measuring materials—all packed in a handsome, professional leatherette-covered carrying case. Work full time or spare time. Either way you'll be amazed at how fast you take orders and how your profits begin to mount! Fill out and mail coupon today.

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Dear Sir: I WANT A SAMPLE SUIT TO WEAR AND SHOW, without paying 1c for it. Rush Valuable Suit Coupon and Sample Kit of actual fabrics. ABSOLUTELY FREE.

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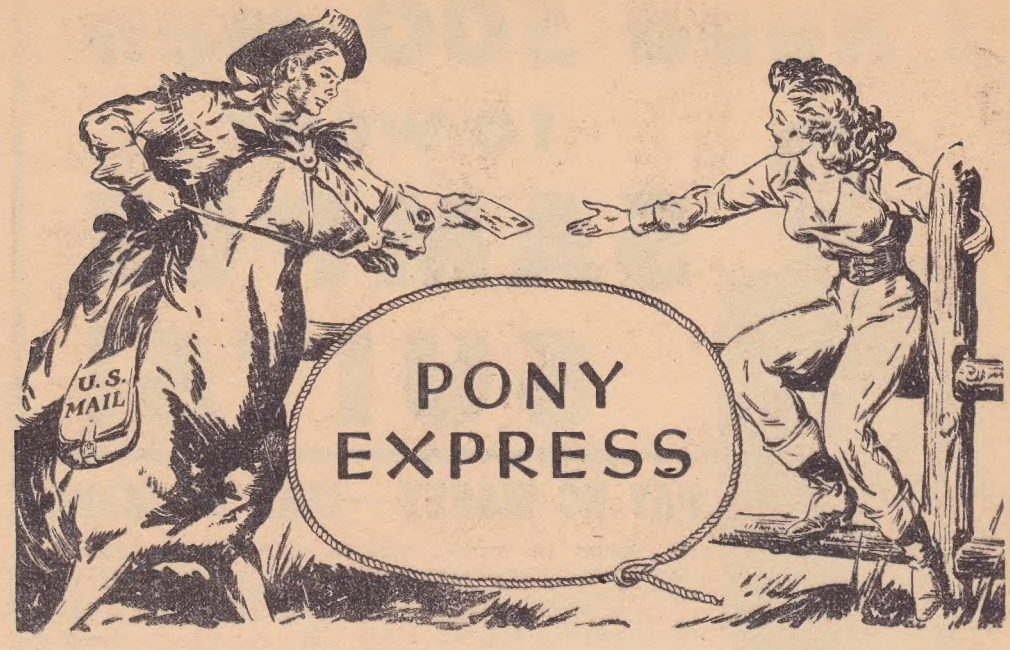

Every lonely RANGELAND ROMANCES reader can get acquainted with our lively pen pals all over the world.

Buenas Dias, pards,

It's mighty gratifying to us to know that people all over the world have come to depend on the Pony Express to supply them with friendly, interesting, honest-to-goodness pen pals.

Of course, that means that a great many letters come piling into our mailbox each month, far more than we can corral the space to print. But you writing pards don't ever have to lack somebody to palaver with on paper. Because right in this column are dozens of tophand pen pals, just waiting for you to pick them for your buddy. Their names and addresses are here right handy, too, so why not surprise them tomorrow with a nice newsy letter?

Get ready, pards, for here comes that Pony Express rider now:

Occupational Jasper

Dear Editor:

I am a soldier on occupation duty in Germany, so will you help me out by printing my letter in the Pony Express?

I am 23 years old, have brown hair and blue eyes, stand 5 ft. 9 in. tall and weigh 160 lbs. My favorite sports are riding and hunting. I also like to write letters and promise to answer all letters received.

Sgt. R. J. BERNDT
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Teen-Age Miss

Dear Editor:

I am in my early teens and am American born, though living in Canada. I like all sports, but swimming, skating, and baseball are my favorites. I do fairly well at all three.

I should like very much to hear from young girls and boys, 12 or over. I'll answer all letters.

DORIS ALMA WILCOX
Hantsport, Hants Co.
Box 202
Nova Scotia, Can.

Waddies Wanted

Dear Editor:

Here's a Westerner who has moved to a new town and would like to receive letters from other Westerners. I enjoy writing, talking and hearing about horses, dogs and the great Western

(Continued on page 12)

6 MAGIC WORDS GIVE YOU DAILY CASH

KENDEX NYLONS ARE FREE UNLESS SATISFACTORY!

Amazing, but true! The most sensational offer ever made! Can you imagine how much money you could make writing orders for wonderful nylons that actually cost nothing unless satisfactory? Is there any woman who would hesitate to wear beautiful nylons at OUR risk? Nothing like this has ever been heard of in the hosiery industry. Never before was it possible for any man or woman, young or old, to earn a steady income so easily!

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.....

(Continued from page 10)

outdoors, and taking pictures of these same subjects.

I'm a gray-eyed, curly-haired brownette, aged 32, 5 ft. 5 in. tall and 130 lbs. How about some letters from other e-qui-nthusiasts?

LUCILLE TURNER
3508 Altamont Way
Redwood, Calif.

Romance and Relativity

Dear Editor:

Well, here's a city girl who has never tried to board the Pony Express before. Here's hoping she isn't wasting a ticket.

I'm 14 years old, 5 ft. 5½ in. tall, 124 lbs. I have light brown hair and blue eyes. I'm a junior in high school and love to dance and read all kinds of literature from Westerns to Einstein and poetry. I like classical and popular music, all sports and listening to the radio. Every kind of movie, I like, too, and also writing letters.

Exchanging snapshots is okay with me, so please, anyone, anywhere, any age, drop me a line at the address below and I will answer you.

JOAN HARVEY
2 Darling Avenue
Toronto 5, Ont.
Can.

Damsel in Distress

Dear Editor:

Won't someone please come to my rescue? I'm an Iowan who would enjoy having some pen pals. I'm 16 years old, have blonde hair and blue eyes. I stand 5 ft. 6 in. in height. My hobbies are reading, writing and dancing. I like nearly all sports and I see quite a few movies.

I would like to hear from different countries and states, so won't you guys and gals from everywhere send some letters my way? I'll try to answer you all.

LORETTA JEBE
Box 99
La Porte City, Iowa

Tall, Dark and Pretty

Dear Editor:

Hi, waddies! How about getting a lot of real tall guys and gals to writing another skyscraper a line or two?

I stand 5 ft. 11½ in. tall, weigh 150 lbs. I have light brown eyes—which sometimes look green—and a light complexion. My hair is light brown and naturally curly. I'm 20 years of age.

My first love is dancing, but then I enjoy all sports, especially horseback riding, and I also have a collection of records, mostly Western.

Best of all, I would like to hear from cowpokes and gals from the ages of 17 to 71. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

DARLINE ADAMS
Box 252
Pretty Prairie, Kan.

Slick Hick

Dear Editor:

I'm a country hick who would gladly exchange correspondence with anyone wishing to write to a real, live Iowa farm boy. My age is 14, my weight 152 lbs., my height, 5 ft. 7 in. My hair is brown and my eyes hazel.

My home is with my aunt and uncle on a farm near Norwalk. I like sports—especially baseball and basketball. I like to hunt rabbits and take long hikes.

Amigos, how about some of you answering my request? Especially you girls. I will answer all letters that I receive, even boys'. I'll trade pictures if you like.

BILL HOFF
Norwalk, Iowa

Finnish Fillies

Dear Editor:

We are two young girls of 19 and 20, looking for pen pals from all over the world. We're both Canadians of Finnish extraction and have blonde hair and blue eyes. We average about 5 ft. 4 in. in height and weigh about 125 lbs.

Our home is on the outskirts of town, but we're both working and living in town at present. We love all kinds of sports, especially dancing, skiing and hiking. We solemnly promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps.

ANN YLIJOKI
and
ELSIE SILLANPAA
21 Hudson Bay
Kirkland Lake, Ont.
Can.

Gift of Tongues

Dear Editor:

What are the chances of a student-soldier

(Continued on page 113)

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Rangeland Romances, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1951. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 19th day of September, 1951. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9508600. Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County. My Commission expires March 30, 1952 (Seal) —Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

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CHAPTER ONE

Howdy, Stranger!

FLORENCE HADLEY liked to humor Gramp, who as often as not claimed to be the one and only Butch Cassidy. But when Gramp threatened to gun for Bill Chaffee, Florence made up a new law and laid it down to him.

"You take one shot at Bill, Gramp," she scolded the old man, "and whether you hit him or not I'll shove you, your artillery, and your wheelchair right off the rim of the canyon."

Gramp did not take to this rule in an agreeable fashion. He blew out his white mustaches and glared like a hawk at his lovely granddaughter. Gramp did not like riding a wheelchair, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. He had finally gotten thrown off a bronco at the age of seventy and had broken a hip. Gramp would never be able to get aboard a horse again.

As partial compensation he had rigged a saddle-boot on the wheelchair for his rifle. He generally kept a shotgun handy, too, and both his old single-action Colt .44's rested in their holsters, one on each side of the chair. Gramp swore that he wasn't going to be caught at this late date by any peace officers.

"Bill Chaffee ain't his right name," Gramp said. "Knew it right away when you told me he didn't have no gun on his hip."

Florence was really mad at Gramp today. She shoved his wheelchair into a corner of the porch and waved her fist in his face. Her coal-black eyes were aflame.

"You've chased off every hombre who ever came into these hills," she accused the

KISS-AND-RUN BANDIT

Sparkling Saga of Frontier Flirts

By Art Lawson

She did not try to fight him off. After all, he deserved a chance to prove himself. . . .

♥ ♥ ♥

Florence was a mountain gal yearning for romance— and reckless enough to seek it in a bandit's arms.

♥ ♥ ♥

old man. "Here I am getting to be an old maid. Heck, I *am* an old maid—I'm twenty years old. I aim to drop my loop on Bill, hog-tie him, slap my iron on him, and hang onto him. You leave him be."

Gramp shook his shaggy head. This granddaughter of his was one sure-enough ball of fire. She was too good for a saddle-tramp like Bill—or for anybody else.

"He's a revenooer," Gramp said darkly. "I kin feel it in my bones. He's trying to ketch me with the goods."

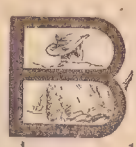
"What do you care?" Florence shot back at him. "You haven't been near your still in two years."

Gramp looked wistful. That had been the best still he had ever built. Honest-Injun copper. He had turned out some brews in that still that never would be forgotten in the hills. It had been a lovely still.

"I still got that cache in the cave," Gramp countered. "Now, what if your revenooer was to find that?" He put on his unhappiest expression.

Florence did not bother to tell him that Bill Chaffee knew all about the cache of whiskey in the cave. Before Gramp busted his hip, he had laid down five or six hundred gallons in good oak kegs and had stored them in Thunder Cave to age and ripen. He had enough in there to last him the rest of his days, he reckoned, and for any of the old Wild Bunch that might happen to drift by in the night. No, Florence thought it unwise to admit that she had met Bill while lugging a jug of whiskey down from the cave for Gramp. It would be signing Bill's death sentence.

She'd never forget that meeting, coming upon Bill suddenly there on the trail. In her imagination she had often peopled the trail with men, but never one quite like Bill. He wasn't the tall-dark-and-handsome of her dreams. He was just a little taller than average size, the right size really for a girl who was only five foot two. He was sort of blond, and homely in an endearing way. He was toting a pack basket on his back, fishing gear and camping equipment.



BILL had been as surprised as Florence when they met there in the woods, where sunlight lay all around in flickering shapes under trees that were beginning to shed their autumn leaves. This time of the year had always been especially beautiful, Florence thought, with sunlight reaching down into the reds and yellows of the forest floor. Florence was dressed only in a shirt and levis, barefooted, her black hair flying loose. Bill had stared at her shamelessly.

But Florence recovered first.

"Evening!" she said, canting her doe-like eyes a little and smiling with a sweet, soft curve of her lips.

Bill's Adam's apple bobbed around a little. "I don't believe it," he gasped. "You're not real."

"Want to touch me and see?" she challenged.

Bill gulped again. Florence dug her bare toes into the leafy ground. Carefully she set down her jug.

"You're real enough," she said, "and male at that. Here I come!"

Flinging her arms around his neck, she hung on good and tight while she kissed him full upon the mouth. It had been a long time since Florence had had her arms around a man, so she took full advantage of this excellent opportunity. When she let him go—reluctantly—his knees clanged together like cymbals. He seemed about to have a stroke.

Florence slanted another of those little crooked smiles at him. "That was a dandy, mister. Come around some time and we'll practice up on improving it a little, huh?"

"Any improvements," he gasped, "would be more than I could take!"

"The only thing to remember is not to come up the canyon trail because my grandpa would probably shoot you."

"Shoot me?"

"Sure," she explained. "He thinks he's

Butch Cassidy. He thinks the revenooers are after him. So come down the trail from the garden patch and whistle like a Bob White."

He turned pale. He stuttered helplessly. Florence began to notice a queer palpitation beneath her ribs. She had just about forgotten what kissing a man could do to her. To make sure she would not forget again very soon, she decided to reinforce the first kiss with a second.

She approached this embrace with a little less impetuosity than the first. She snuggled up against his chest, grabbed his ears, and hauled his face down to hers. His arms clamped themselves around her, and he pulled her close. When the man came up for air, he reverently kissed the side of her neck.

By the glazed look in his eyes Florence began to fear that she had overdone this. The man was obviously getting up steam for a third round—and it would be a strenuous one, too. She pushed against his chest.

"Merember—" She was all mixed up. "I mean, rebember, wizzle like a Whob Bite. Come around for supper tonight."

Back at the cabin, Gramp accused her of taking a swig of his red-eye. Florence shook her head vigorously. She was experiencing considerable trouble with her breathing. Her heart fizzed like a short fuse.

"It was a man," she confessed. "What a man!"

Gramp's craggy old face brightened like an eagle who's spotted a ground squirrel for lunch. He had not had a live target in a long time.

"Been expecting one of those law officers," Gramp said. "Felt it in my bones." He fished the rifle from its sheath, cocked it, aimed it carefully at a tree down where the trail took a bend. He had used that tree as a target for so long the slugs had dug a hole in it big enough to hide a whiskey jug. He made a bull's-eye this time and grunted with great satisfaction while gunsmoke made a gray wreath around his head and the echoes died in the hills.

"Yep," he said, "felt it in my bones."

He took a swig from his jug.

Florence cooked a fine supper, but Bill Chaffee did not show up for it. There was duck and wild rice, trout she had caught especially for him, and some wild plum brandy. It was mighty good eating, but it would have tasted better if Bill had been at the table. Remembering how she had left him rooted to the trail, she went up there again, half expecting to find him still there. She found, instead, a scribbled note stuck into a tree by a sharpened peg.

Goddess:

I came up here to get away from dames, not to get me a dame. Don't keep a light burning in the window for me. I'm not coming back.

Love,

Bill Chaffee.

P.S. Borrowed some of Butch Cassidy's drinking likker. After what you did to me I needed it.

B.C.

Florence cried a little, crumpled up the paper and stamped on it, then went back to the cabin. It was then that she made her threat to Gramp to push him, wheelchair and all, into the canyon if he ever took a pot shot at Bill.

But in a little, cold corner of her heart, she felt she would never see the guy again. She should have shoved Gramp into the canyon long ago.

FLORENCE puttered around for a couple of days, half hoping to see Bill again, and then saddled up to ride to town to buy some coffee, sugar, and other small supplies. She squared off in front of Gramp before hitting the trail.

"When I come back," she threatened, "I'm going to ride right up to the house! I'm not going to give any Bob White call, or anything else."

Gramp was alarmed. "I might shoot you by mistake," he bleated.

"You might at that," Florence said, stick-

ing out her small but firm chin. "And after the funeral you'd have to do your own cooking."

She rode away while he was still sputtering. Up here on the top of Thunder Mountain was the most wonderful country in the world. There was wild game aplenty, and the trout were just begging to be hooked. Behind the cabin was a clearing where vegetables grew like mad. From Gramp's front porch you could look down the canyon and off for miles over the top of ridge after ridge of blue and white mountains. The air was so clean it crackled while you breathed it.

But lately Florence had been feeling unhappy, not with the people who kept away, but with Gramp who kept them away. After meeting Bill Chaffee in the woods, she was determined not to let Gramp get away with his Butch Cassidy talk any longer.

Florence dropped off her saddle bags at the American Hotel, put up her horse and mule, then ambled down to the *Elite Café* to see her old friend, Hannah Shay.

Hannah had been eating pretty well since she got the job at the *Elite*. It had not fattened her, exactly, though she had gained a few well-distributed pounds. It had moulded her uniform into a very symphonic shape, that caused more than one man to order extra coffee or pie just so he could hang around a while longer and contemplate her dangerous curves. Still, her baby-blue eyes were guileless as ever, and she never had to curl her gorgeous golden hair. Florence had always sort of envied Hannah her sumptuous charms.

"Hi, Hannah." Florence slid onto a stool.

Automatically, Hannah slapped down a glass of water, a napkin, a fly-specked menu, and a set of eating tools.

Then she said: "Hi, Flossy!"

Florence turned to the cowboy at the far end of the counter and smiled. "Hello, Ted."

He looked up from the local paper and grinned down at her. "Butch Cassidy kill any revenooers lately?" he wanted to know.

That made Florence mad all over again, not at Ted, who was an old pal of hers, but at Gramp.

"He no more thinks he's Butch Cassidy than I do," Florence asserted. "He's just talking tough and shooting off his guns to keep the boys from hanging around the house. He's scared that I'll get married and leave him to do his own housekeeping in his wheelchair."

"You just say the word," Ted offered, "and I'll take away the old goat's guns and hang around your house for the rest of my life."

"Why, gosh," she cried. "You proposing —to me?"

Ted blushed very red. "You might call it that," he admitted.

"I never!" Hannah squealed.

Once that would have made Florence very happy. She had been waiting a long time for Ted to get around to asking her. But he had asked too late. Bill Chaffee had changed the picture. Though Ted had sneaked a kiss now and then, he had never stirred her up like Bill did. She almost felt like crying again.

"Thanks, Ted," she said slowly. "It's sure nice of you. But I already got a man— or had him, I mean."

"Good grief!" Hannah cried. "Where'd you find him?"

"Coming down from Thunder Cave," Florence said. Ted seemed absolutely stunned. Florence hated to do this to him. "I kissed him and he ran away. He wrote me this note and stuck it on a tree."

Florence smoothed out the crumpled bit of paper that she had retrieved from the path where she had thrown it. Hannah's blue eyes popped.

"Him?" she squawked. "Bill Chaffee?"

"What's the matter with him?" Florence asked.

Ted began to laugh in a jerky sort of manner. "He's a killer, that's all, a lady killer."

"You can't have him," Hannah cried. "He's mine!"

"He's not yours," Florence shouted. "He's mine—if I ever find him again."

From the far end of the counter Ted asked gloomily: "What I'd like to know is, what does that guy have that I don't?"

It was a tough question to answer.

"When he kisses a girl," Florence said, "he sure can rattle her marbles."

"He rattled mine plenty," Hannah agreed with a scowl.

Ted got up looking very determined. Instinctively Florence knew what he was going to do. He was going to kiss her, and she just sat there waiting for him.

CHAPTER TWO

A Kiss in the Dark

TED whirled Florence around on her stool, put his hands around her waist and hoisted her up onto the counter, where she sat with her legs dangling and her mouth open. She had lovely legs and a nice soft mouth that just begged for attention. Even scared a little as she was, she was as pretty a girl as Ted could stand. Not sumptuous like Hannah, but nicely built in the proper areas. Ted wanted to take her down to his ranch and build a special little corral for her. But now he was just plain mad.

"That guy's a bum!" Ted shouted at her. "He's a tramp. He's no good even if he does put all the girls into a tizzy."

"You watch what you say about him," Hannah threatened from her side of the counter. "He's a dog, that's what he is, running off into the woods and making up to Flossie after what he did to me."

"He's a fraud and a fake," Ted went on angrily. "Says he was collecting local material, whatever that is. He collected all my girls, that's what he did."

"It's your own fault he collected Flossie," Hannah put in. "You're to blame."

Ted frowned darkly. He could be really quite exciting, Florence thought, when he got mad enough. Ted had always been such an easy-going guy, he was kind of frightening now.

"You told him about Gramp thinking he was Butch Cassidy," Hannah needled him. "He wouldn't have gone up there if you hadn't told him that."

"I thought Gramp would shoot him," Ted said sourly. "Or scare him out of the country." There was a fleeting expression of pleasure on his face as he contemplated Bill Chaffee either running or dying. Then for a moment his eyes held steady on Florence's, and she felt his fingers twitching against her ribs.

"If he can rattle your marbles," he announced abruptly, "I can rattle them too."

Whereupon he set out to prove it. He turned her mouth up to his and kissed her soundly. Her heart gave a thump like someone kicking a beer barrel. Ted had kissed her before, but never like this. He had always been tender and gentle. Now he was rough and angry. Her mouth began to hurt and her chest ached. She was hot and confused, yet she did not try to fight him off. After all, he deserved a chance to prove himself. She began to tremble. Her hands lifted as if to hold him, then dropped. This kiss in anger just did not take.

Ted straightened with his head cocked slightly as if listening for something. Florence was faint, her pulse galloping. Hannah breathed deeply right behind her ear.

Hannah let go with a long, drawn-out, "Wheeeeee!"

Ted shook his head. "Can't hear any marbles rattling," he said, then added, still angry and disappointed, "I'll go find this guy for you and make him marry you. I'll make him marry Hannah, too. He'll be a regular Brigham Young before I'm through with him. It's not safe having a hombre like that running around in the woods in single harness."

"It sure isn't," Florence agreed.

And she began to wonder if it would be safe with Ted in the woods. Suppose he had been on the path instead of Bill? Maybe she had just been ripe for being stirred up. . . .

They made intricate plans for running down and capturing Bill Chaffee. While Ted rode out to his ranch for some extra horses that had been trained for mountain work, Florence bought the supplies for which she had come to town, and Hannah packed the chuck baskets. By the time Ted got back and the girls were set, it was too late to start that day. The sun had already settled behind the black spruces of the mountains. The trail up the canyon was not easy even in daylight. So they postponed their excursion until the next day.

Besides, this was Saturday and there was to be a dance down at Pioneer Hall. Living up in the hills with Gramp, Florence had lost track of the days so had not brought along a dress. Hannah offered to lend her one. Florence doubted that one would fit her. Hannah noticed how she was staring and laughed.

"Oh, I'm not so fat as I look in spots," she said cheerfully. "Besides, I like to wear my dresses tight, and you don't, so let's try, anyway."

Florence climbed the stairs to Hannah's room over the restaurant. It was neat, though somewhat gaudy like Hannah. There was a Cinderella doll on the bed and a big teddy bear on the dresser with a bright, pink bow around his neck. Florence recognized every one of Hannah's dresses, and so would everybody else. It would have been plumb discouraging except for the fact that the whole town would realize that it was an emergency.

Florence slipped out of her shirt and pants. Hannah awarded her with a very admiring glance.

"You're getting a nicer figure every day, kid. It just doesn't show in the rags you usually wear. I hope Bill Chaffee never get a look at you in one of my dresses."

Florence slipped one over her head and hoped so, too. It was just too daring for a simple mountain girl. The neck was cut square, low and drafty. Hannah had been quite right about the fit—Florence filled it out neatly, though not tightly. But Florence hesitated as she studied herself in the mirror.

"I dunno," she said.

"Of course you do!" Hannah cried. "You've been living the life of a hermit too long. You haven't been to a dance in four months. Tonight we'll kick up our heels—and if Bill shows up, I'll fight you for him."

Florence made up her mind. "Okay, I'll go along, Hannah. And thanks very much for the loan of this dress."

"You'll be the big hit," Hannah said.

Then she slipped into one of her own frocks, a very tidy little item that clung close to every sinuous curve. Florence closed her eyes tight for a second. They were misty when she opened them again.

"You and I have been friends for a long time, Hannah," she said. "But I will fight if Bill shows up tonight. No holds barred."

"Right," the blonde said with a laugh. "Tooth and nails."

"Biting in the clinches," Florence added.

At that moment a shrill whistle sounded below. Hannah was the first to the window. Parting the curtains she said: "There he is."

"Bill?" Florence leaped for the door.

"Ted," Hannah threw at her. "Our escort for the night. Ted is down there on the boardwalk whistling for us. If it was Bill I would have jumped out the window."

Florence felt rather weak.

THE shindig started off pretty slow. The men were tending to their jugs out behind the livery stable where they had the likker hidden, and the women were divided into two groups, those who had met

Bill Chaffee during his capture of the village, and those who had not. Those who had fallen under his influence were a little punch drunk. Those who had not were indignant about the whole thing.

As one of the elderly ladies said: "A sensible girl like Florence Hadley wouldn't carry on like these silly girls if she met him."

Though Florence was within hearing distance at the time, she missed the conversation because she was trying to eavesdrop on a group of men talking in an undertone nearby.

"Chaffee's story don't hold water," one of the men said. "Claiming he's a writer looking up dope for cowboy stories. If you're asking me, he's one of those bank robbers that escaped from the state pen a couple of weeks ago."

"That's what I've been thinking," another man agreed; and the rest of the group buzzed with excitement.

Florence felt as if her ears were standing up like a dog's. She sidled away toward the women, who had been casting admiring glances at the manner in which she complemented Hannah's borrowed dress.

"You're simply delicious in that gown," one of them squealed. "If Ted Mayhew doesn't finally come to his senses tonight and propose to you—"

She stopped with another squeal and a quick blush because Ted had just come around the corner to claim the first dance with Florence.

Ted hauled her off onto the dance floor without even asking her. He just took her along as if she were a heifer he had bought at an auction. Ever since the kiss that had failed to rattle her marbles, he had acted mighty queer. Seeing her in that low-necked dress just made him worse.

He would not talk. The caller hollered for the *Portland Fancy* and the orchestra tuned up. Pretty soon they were going through the steps of this dance, rather sedately, because the party had not yet warmed up. Old Dan Flynn took Florence for the second dance and gave her a real good time and some startling news.

"They think them bank robbers are hanging around here somewhere," he said. "Gramp has got so much publicity since he started claiming to be Butch Cassidy that half the crooks in the state think he really is and would be the sort who would help hide them out."

"They couldn't!" Florence cried.

It simply made no sense that Gramp's story could be believed. Yet after the fourth dance Florence decided she had to get away to think about this all alone. She crept out to the gallery, where half a dozen young couples happily were tending to their more intimate business. She scurried on down the outside staircase to the wagon yard.

The darkness was like velvet and the sound of dancing was as far away as if heard in a dream. She saw a man standing alone near the alley with his hat pulled down over his face, and he saw her because she was standing in a bit of light, though her face was in total darkness.

"I came back for you," he said. "I just got here."

The voice was only vaguely familiar, and Florence was sure he had mistaken her for somebody else. She stood where she was and held her tongue, while the man edged over slowly, keeping away from the patch of light in which she waited.

"I want to marry you," he said slowly, intently.

He took her hand and she suddenly recognized him.

"Bill!" she sobbed and flung herself against him.

One of his hands crept up her bare back while the other clutched at her slender waist, pulling her up against him. He did not kiss her at first, or even look down at her. He was listening very intently for she knew not what. Yet she was content for the moment just to lean against him, to feel the strong beat of his heart, and the

slow progress of his hand up over her bare shoulder, where it halted momentarily to flick the cap sleeve down lower on her arm. She did not mind. She liked the cool sensation of night air on the spot where the sleeve had been. Bill leaned down to kiss the tip of her shoulder.

He had come back for her even though he had written that he would not, and now she could not wait a second more. She twisted around, pressed her soft warm lips up against his mouth and snuggled right close to him. Though he was startled at that for a moment, he soon gave her as well as she gave him. Oh, this was something poor Hannah should know about! Florence had already caught Bill and captured him single-handed.

But Bill finally had to take a breath. Lifting his head he smiled softly down on her. She smiled back, so dreamy she could do nothing but let her weight rest on his arms. Inexplicably he began to frown. His glance moved from her eyes to her nose, down to her chin. It rested a moment on her throat; then deliberately he held her away while he stared at her dress.

"You!" he gasped. "Who are you? Where'd you get that dress?"

"Why—" Florence could hardly get her breath. "It's Hannah's. She lent it to me. I'm her friend. I mean, I was. I'm Florence. You know—"

He shook his head vigorously. "I guess I owe you an apology, Florence. I was looking for Hannah. That dress—"

Florence was sure she was going to faint. She stumbled back against a post that held up the gallery above. She squeezed as much air into her lungs as she could and let go with a terrific scream.

The whole evening had been so tense, it was like putting a match to a keg of powder. The Pioneer's Hall erupted men and women. Couples that had been snuggled down in the back of their wagons hopped to the ground. The sheriff came running around the corner from the alley like a boogered steer. Florence could not explain why she did it, but she tripped him.

He got up mad as a bob-tail bull in fly time.

"Who done that?" he howled.

"That man," Florence gasped. "He—he tried to kidnap me!"

"What man?" the sheriff growled. Bill Chaffee had disappeared.

"I don't know," Florence said. "A stranger. A little dark-haired man with a mustache." She didn't know why she gave a description that was the opposite of Bill Chaffee's. She seemed to be in control of another mind. "He looked like a bank robber," she got out.

CHAPTER THREE

Little Miss Confusion

FLORENCE reckoned this was a broken heart, all right—this dull, dismal feeling that reached from the top of her head to her pink toes. She might just as well go on back up the canyon and humor Gramp in his pose as Butch Cassidy. She might just as well let him take a couple of shots at her. Maybe he'd put her out of her agony.

The only trouble was, Florence was angry again, and she knew that a girl with a broken heart should never be mad. She should just pine away until her life ended in a soft, mauve sigh. She should wither up like an old leaf, or dry up like water in a mud hole in the sun. She should not burn like a match flame being set under a camp fire.

At first she did not even think of the broken heart angle. There was too much turmoil, too much stress. Men crowded around her, each yelling louder than the other. She stuck to her story about the man being small, dark and mustached, and the crowd spread out, guns at ready, armed with pistols, rifles, shotguns, knives, all

sorts of artillery. Cautiously, because the quarry was believed to be a killer and bank robber, and a kidnapper of pretty girls, the men searchel all through the wagonyard down into the town itself. They turned up one of the valley's most respectable ranchers setting on the tailgate of his wagon with some one else's wife. But the girl-stealer with the mustache had gotten away, and it was a disgusted group that gathered in the Pioneer's Hall long after midnight to devour the supper that had been prepared for the dance.

"You sure that guy was short and had a mustache?" the sheriff asked Florence for the tenth time.

"He wasn't much taller than me," she said. "At least he didn't have to lean down to kiss me. And his mustache made me sneeze."

"Kissed you, did he?" Hannah cried. "Rattle your marbles?"

"There's only one guy who could do that," Florence said doggedly. "And he's gone over the hill."

Ted glowered unhappily. Everyone was babbling around, making Florence the center of the excitement. She was tired and confused and she wanted to go home, but from the way Ted was acting, it looked like he would never be willing to take her. He disappeared for a spell, and when he came back he looked a bit more confident. Likely he had tapped somebody's jug.

"Time to go home," he said gruffly.

Because he had brought two girls, he took two home. Florence stopped off at Hannah's to retrieve her pants and shirt. She thought bitterly of her moment of triumph, when Bill was kissing her and she couldn't wait to tell Hannah about it. Now she would always have to keep that kiss a secret.

She would have to go looking for Bill tomorrow with Hannah and Ted, too, or else make up some good excuse. She couldn't imagine anyone she wanted less to see than Bill, but she couldn't say that to Hannah. No, she would just have to go hunting, like it or not.

"Funny that you let that little bandit kiss you," Hannah said curiously.

"I didn't let him," Florence denied. "He grabbed me. Kissed me. His mustache tickled my nose and I sneezed. I kicked him in the shin and hollered, that's all." She flung the dress on the bed. How she hated that frock! She slipped the shirt over her head and tucked in its tails. "Got to get some sleep if we're going Bill-collecting tomorrow."

Ted was waiting for her on the boardwalk, still moody. He took her across the street to the hotel, where she had a room for the night.

"You really plan to go out and find the bandit, Bill Chaffee?"

"Yep!" she said stoutly.

"And what do you figure on doing with him when you ketch him? I've been thinking, maybe it isn't legal for you both to marry him."

"We're going to fight for him," Florence said.

"Oh?" he said sardonically. Leaning down close to her, he scowled, and for a moment she thought he was going to kiss her again. He let his chance drift by. "I was setting on the gallery railing looking at the stars when you snuck down the stairs," he told her. "I didn't hear any gal sneeze when her nose was tickled by a little bandit's mustache. And the hombre I saw run out and duck into the feed store next door was as tall as I am."

Florence was shocked. "Then why didn't you tell the sheriff where he went?"

"Why'd you describe him as just the opposite from what he was?" Ted countered.

He led her up the wide stairs to the hotel. After getting her key at the desk, he took her upstairs and unlocked her door. "Good night!" he said, and roughly pushed her up against the door frame and kissed her again. He kissed her so violently that her head was full of stars and her lips felt sun-

burned. When he left, she closed the door behind her and fell across the bed. . . .

That was when she began to believe her heart was shattered. There in the hotel room's loneliness, Florence slowly got undressed. She brushed her teeth, said her prayers, and looked at herself for a full minute in the mirror. Then she jumped into bed.

She had not realized before tonight that she had a gorgeous figure and a pert sort of beauty. But what good did it do her? Bill Chaffee might just as well have slapped her down there behind Pioneer's Hall. Kissing a dress, that was what Bill had done.

She finally went to sleep, and woke in the morning when someone banged on the door. This was certainly not the right way for a broken-hearted girl to behave. She knew she should have stayed awake all night tossing in her bed and feeling dismal and alone, determined to end everything. What was that old song about "The Forsaken"? The girl who waited in vain for her lover to meet her down at the old spring where he had promised to be? She fell in and drowned, finally, with nobody to mourn her.

The banging on the door resumed.

"Florence?"

It was Ted. "I'm up!" she called and threw her feet out of bed.

LORENCE, never one to dawdle, was ready in minutes. She found Ted and Hannah at the Elite Café eating breakfast. Hannah had found someone to substitute for her for a week and had told everyone that she was going to vacation with her old pal, Florence.

They ate quickly and started out with a small audience urging them on. Most of the town, after the excitement of the night before, was still in bed. Florence was grateful for that. She led the way with her own horse. Hannah followed with the pack mules, and Ted brought up the rear with the spare mounts.

When they reached the wide space in the canyon where the stream formed a swirling pool called the Witch's Cauldron, Ted brought the tiny cavalcade to a halt.

"When you set out on a campaign," he said, "to catch a crook, win a war, or find a husband for a couple of rattle-brained girls, you got to have a plan.'

"Who's rattle-brained?" Hannah challenged.

Hannah, Florence had been too distressed to notice, looked just as feminine and desirable in levis and shirt as she had in her calico gown. Hannah would have looked that way in a packing case with the lid nailed down.

"Maybe I'm the one who's rattle-brained," Ted answered, "because I sure don't know why I'm chaperoning you two girls on this man-hunting expedition. But, since I am, let's get down to a plan."

"And no more name calling?" Florence warned.

Ted nodded. "The point of this is that we don't want to get off on a wild goose hunt. The last person who saw Bill Chaffee was Florence. Now—where was it that you last saw everybody's sweetheart?"

"If you mean Bill Chaffee," Florence said archly, "it was on the path from the cave and—" she rolled her eyes—"oh, boy!"

Ted frowned. "Well then, we go up there and start looking for him *where you last saw him.*" He dragged out these last words until it hurt. Then he said: *"Vamonos!"* which means, "Let's get a move on."

They climbed steadily after that, up the steep gorge that formed the canyon. Florence's broken heart did not pain so much up here, and as they reached more familiar territory she began to enjoy their trip. They stopped for lunch and a rest where the river took a great curve to form a pool. Here the biggest rainbow trout always lurked.

"We could wet a line and get enough trout for supper, Ted," Florence suggested, "or go on farther up to another pool where the trout used to jump right into the frying pan. Only they're scared now and hiding because of Gramp's shooting."

"Some other day," Ted growled. "After we've captured the Great Lover."

Laughing, Florence touched his arm. She had never seen Ted so burned up. It amused her, and she guessed she sort of liked him for getting up such a sweat.

"Jealous, just a little bit?" she ribbed him.

"Hell, no!" he roared. "A lot!"

He got up angrily and yanked the cinch of his horse. He had begun the day by helping the girls. Now he was too mad to do that. He rode on ahead, but when they approached the tree that Gramp liked to sight his rifle on, Florence passed him.

"Wait!"

She whistled her best Bob White. No answer. She whistled again. Then she put her hat on a pole and stuck it around the corner. No shot.

"Gramp must of died!" she said. "This ain't natural." She cupped her hands to form a megaphone. "Hey, Gramp! Hey—Butch Cassidy!"

Silence.

"He *is* dead!" Florence sobbed. She couldn't bear the thought of losing the ornery old gentleman. She jumped from the horse to scramble up the steep slope that led up to the cabin.

Gramp was in his wheel chair looking very strange. His eyes were just as sharp as ever, but he had been gagged, and lashed to the chair which was tied to the railing. He had been relieved of all his artillery. Gramp was making a grunting sound.

Florence slashed away the ropes, and cut the gag. Gramp gulped.

"Likker!" he croaked.

She watered some for him, then gave him a straight slug. Hannah and Ted arrived by the time that Gramp could talk.

"Who did it, Gramp?" Florence asked.

"Revenooers." Gramp sounded like a thirsty bull. "That Bill Chaffee who kissed you, he done it. He and his pal."

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Arms to the Rescue

TWO hombres had snuck in just after Florence had ridden down to town, Gramp said. Gramp had been tied up for five or six hours, and he had to be lubricated rather frequently. They had come down the Thunder Cave trail, and he should of shot them, dang it, but he'd promised not to shoot this Bill Chaffee, and he was a man of his word. Gramp had asked, "You Bill Chaffee?" and the feller had said he was. What's more he claimed to be the grand nephew of Flat Nose George who used to ride with the Wild Bunch. The other gent was related to the Sundance Kid, another member of that desperate outfit. All they wanted was to set around a spell and yarn with the one and only member of the bunch who had survived, old Butch Cassidy, himself.

So Gramp brought out his bottle and they praised it as the best likker ever made. Must be a million years old, they said; and Gramp said, not quite. So pretty soon the jug was empty.

That was where Gramp made his big mistake. He told Bill to go up to the cave to get another jug. Though revenooers had been in the cave before, they never had found anything. Gramp had all his kegs hidden down a secret passage. So he told Bill how to locate it, and Bill came back with a couple of jugs and they all went on yarning.

One of the boys, Gramp did not know which, cooked supper, and after the dishes were done they helped Gramp to bed. When he woke up next morning, he had to

be hoisted into his wheel chair. It was then that he discovered he had been disarmed. These two ornery hombres admitted to being revenooers, too. They were going to break up his still no matter what, but first they wanted Butch to tell them where he had hidden all the loot he had taken in all his robberies. These revenooers said that he should return all his stolen property to the rightful owners, and prove that he was now an honest man.

"What loot?" Florence wanted to know.

Gramp blushed. "Butch Cassidy was supposed to have lots of loot. Everybody knows that."

Gramp could make Florence madder than anybody, and quicker. "Why, you old fraud," she hollered at him. "I suppose you took to boasting to those convicts all about the loot you had buried around the place. It serves you right, hang it, if they believed you and tied you up while they went searching."

"Maybe it does, kid," Gramp said in a hang-dog fashion. "I've just been scared lately you'd marry up with Ted, here, and run off to the valley. But I'm starved, girl, and afore you go, how about building me a good strong stew?" He put a lot of appeal into his voice. "You, Ted, how about fetching me a jug—if them revenooers didn't bust up all my kegs?" He glanced slyly over at Hannah and licked his lips. "If you ain't the most handsome critter I've seen in a dog's age, girl! Come on up here where I can take a good look at you."

Hannah swayed up the steps and stood arched nicely for Gramp's hawk-eyes to admire. He shook his head and sighed, and because any man was a man to Hannah, she melted him up with a smile. Florence reckoned the experience hadn't hurt the old man any and ducked into the house to consider a meal. Throwing some firewood into the stove, she reflected that she never would have suspected that Bill Chaffee would turn out to be so low a character as to tie up Gramp.

Ted followed her into the kitchen. He took her by the shoulders and held her at arm's length to study her dark eyes and lovely face. Florence could hear Gramp extravagantly comparing Hannah to the Jersey Lily, or some other ancient lovely he claimed to have known.

Ted said soberly: "I'm going to scout the woods for those two skunks, including Kissing Bill, and when I catch them they aren't going to like it. Probably they're up in the cave, drunk or worse. Anyway, I'm going to bring them in, and I owe you an apology."

She did not know what for, and he didn't tell her. At the moment there in the kitchen, she was terrifically appealing. Her mouth was open a little as she waited for him to apologize, and her chin was up. There was a little dew of perspiration on her brow to prove that she was built of flesh and bones rather than imported marble. Maybe she even had a heart. A man never knew without making a test.

Worth trying, he thought, even if he hadn't made out spectacularly before. So he tried.

Instead of approaching her like a Sunday School boy kissing his aunt, or attacking her as if he intended throwing her for a thirty yard loss, he chose something in between. Not masterful, exactly, but as well as he could do.

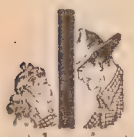
He said: "Since I might get shot by those bandits, or get drunk with them, I got nothing to lose."

Whereupon he kissed her. That kiss was like nothing he had ever experienced before. Florence seemed suddenly to have a change of heart. She hung on with everything she had. When he finally pulled away, her lips had traced their soft pattern clear across his face from ear to ear and half way back again.

"Par'n me," he muttered and stumbled out the door.

She fell into a chair, half crying, half laughing. Her eyes were deep, wonderous

pools. Whoever would have thought that Ted's kiss could affect a girl so?



IT TAKES some girls a long time to learn, and some guys a long time to catch on, too. Florence reckoned it had taken her just a little longer than most. There was Bill Chaffee to consider. How come he had shaken her up the way he had? Maybe—this notion suddenly crept into her mind—maybe because he was a novelty. Maybe it wasn't so important after all. That little tussle with Ted in the kitchen had opened her eyes.

She ran to open the kitchen door, but there was no sign of the man out there. There was nothing except the narrow but definite path leading up to Thunder Cave. Gramp had worn that path a good six inches deep during his years of tending the still, and Florence had added more depth to it since the old boy got laid up. Feeling slightly silly, she realized that anbody who really wanted to discover Gramp's secret could have done so for the past ten or fifteen years.

Up on the porch Gramp was still bemused with Hannah. Florence set up a shout for the blonde girl.

"Hey!" she shouted. "You, Hannah! You know the restauranting business. Gramp's been eating nothing but home-cooked food. How about cooking him up a good one-arm-lunch stew?"

Hannah did not move. Gramp had gotten around to comparing her with the Immortal Diana and various other characters as if he had known them in the flesh. Hannah liked that kind of guff, even from this decrepit old gent.

"Hannah!" Florence tugged the blonde off the porch. "There's the kitchen. There's the vittles. Cook up something for us all. I'm going hunting for—" she stopped. "For a dear," she gulped.

"I could stand some venison, myself," Hannah said. "Hey, your Gran'pa's wonderful. Did you know he took Lillian Russell to Rectors when just about everybody else in New York was after her, including Diamond Jim Brady?"

"Sure," Florence said. "I knew all about it. And that's only the start."

Hannah's blue eyes bugged. Deftly Florence shifted her apron to Hannah's more substantial waist and tied it tight. That apron looked good on Hannah.

Florence ran to her room for her old Winchester rifle. She put in fresh cartridges, threw away her shoes, and crept outside by way of the kitchen window. She could hear Hannah singing in the kitchen and Gramp's jug gurgling.

Florence smiled. After this afternoon with Hannah, Gramp would never be happy again as a hermit. He could be argued into moving back to town. Suddenly Florence was glad she had Hannah along. Hannah was going to solve many problems.

Florence did not follow the trail. She made a wide circle around it with the intention of coming up on Thunder Cave from the flank. If those two hombres who called themselves revenooers were still hanging around, they would certainly have the trail covered. But it would take an army to keep the entire woods under observation.

Florence crept up through the woods and rocks until she could cut down on the mouth of the cave from above. Here on a small ledge where she had often spent hours sunning herself, she lay on her stomach. She glanced back down the path toward the cabin. A black spiral of smoke showed that Hannah was building up the fire. Gramp's raucous voice indicated that he had had another drink of whiskey or another look at Hannah, or both. Gramp was telling how he had led the charge of the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill.

Something stirred in the bushes. It was Ted Mayhew moving up toward the mouth of the cave, which was silent as a tomb. Something stirred behind her, and Florence's head whirled like the needle on a

compass. There in a bunch of leaves Bill Chaffee grinned down on her.

"Ah, the dryad," he sighed. "The nymph."

"Ah, the skunk," Florence said.

BILL said softly: "That kiss last night was sweeter than the nectar from the trumpet vine, but it wasn't meant for me. Your heart wasn't in it. Now, shall we get back to business?"

Florence had to ponder this. She had no use for trumpet vines or fancy talk.

"Bill," she said, "you're a dog for treating my old Gramp like you did."

"Me?" Bill was astonished. "I went down town last night looking for Hannah. I got you by mistake. But I never did anything to your grandpa. I just got back here myself."

Now that he mentioned it, he could not possibly have been the Bill Chaffee her Gramp had talked about. It must have been someone else—one of those bandits, possibly—using his name.

"Bill," she said, "I've been living in a dream world. But not any more. My dreams are going to come true from this day on. Now, where are those bandits?"

"They're around here somewhere," he said.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Just a law-dog sent down by the state to find them," he said, "making like I was a writer looking for stories."

He had picked the right place for stories and rumors, the Elite Café, with curvaceous little Hannah Shay soaking up local gossip the way her bread soaked up beef gravy.

"Sorry I had you wrong, Bill. Oh, there's Ted!" She almost shouted it because Ted was just about to crawl into the cave.

Thunder Cave had a wide opening through which a man could walk upright. From her point of view Florence could see someone waiting behind a big boulder to bash Ted on the head with a chunk of rock. She was a good hundred yards away, but she had faith in her Winchester. Carefully she lined up the sights. Slowly she squeezed the trigger. She did not hit the man. She only succeeded in cutting up some rock splinters and throwing them in his face. Before she could lever a second bullet into the chamber, Bill Chaffee had charged.

Bill went right through the rocky country like an avalanche. Ted came from below like a bull. The two men in the rocks put up a mighty tough fight but it didn't last long. With both Ted and Bill tearing into them, they soon realized that they were licked.

The bandit who had claimed to be Bill Chaffee the night before promptly took back his story.

"Seemed like a handy name when Butch mentioned it," he said. "Thanks, Bill."

Bill said magnanimously: "Glad you liked it."

Then they turned to more important matters. Bill locked up the prisoners in the cabin, but he didn't seem to be in any hurry to rush them back to the pen. He and Hannah beat a retreat into the kitchen together. Florence backed Ted into Thunder Cave.

"Ted," Florence said, "if you want a snort of Gramp's likker before I tell you what I'm going to tell you—"

"Lookit, kid," he said. "Just being on the same earth with you makes me drunk. It's made me drunk for years. I don't need any of Butch Cassidy's likker."

"Me, either," she said. "I'm a slow learner, Ted. Let me see what kind of a teacher you are."

Ted gave a demonstration. It was a devastating demonstration. The stars blacked out in the sky and the world spun backwards. No marbles rattled. But when Ted kissed Florence it squeezed her heart, and then opened it up wide for him to come in.

THE END

Pin-Up Girl

Soldiers obey her call "to arms"
She gets their attention all right,
For when they spy her front-line charms—

To finish the limerick in this March contest just write the last line on a postcard and mail to Pin-Up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In case of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this March contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on March 4th, 1952. The judges' decision will be final. **See page 113 for the winner of the September contest.**

CORRAL ME A BRIDE!

♥ ♥ ♥

The handsome young homesteader didn't know how to spell "trouble," until he hired tempestuous Sherry . . . to hunt him down a wife.

♥ ♥ ♥

WHEN Sherry O'Shea first saw him, he was tumbling off the end of the river dock with a buxom blonde girl. Not that either of them had planned to go swimming. Their unexpected dunking was all Sherry's fault.

Sherry had decided to rest a minute at the landing, choosing a barrel to sit upon. She had leaned back against the stack behind her, hardly touching it. Without warning, the whole lot had gone crashing down.

The tawny-haired young ranny had been standing at the water, holding hands with the blonde, when the avalanche came upon them. There was nothing they could do but jump. Sherry took one wildly startled look at the destruction she had caused and another at him as he came up out of the muddy stream. Then she lifted her skirts and ran.

Later, she learned who he was. Wade Larimer, an adventuring homesteader who had followed the land rush into the valley as she and her brother Frank had done. Some said he had punched cattle in Texas and others said he had driven freight. And it might also be true that he had taken a spell in the hills, hoping to strike it lucky mining silver.

Sherry had no interest in him or the tales about him. She hated this valley where violence seemed to spawn, and all the raw land beyond it. Her dream of making a new home here had collapsed with her brother's death. Frank had been left to die after being beaten and robbed, and Sherry knew who had done it.

Fowler Reit had killed Frank. Sherry had no proof against the gambler, and even less hope of exacting vengeance. All she wanted now was to get out, to make her way back to civilization. But she needed money to pay her stage fare to the home she had left in Kansas. Reit was here in Bison, and Sherry had taken a room at the same hotel. She meant to rob him as he had robbed her brother and use the money to get back home.

Which was why she was even less to blame for the fire than for spilling over the stack of barrels that had dumped Wade into the river. Sherry had been trailing Reit all day. She was stalking him when the fire started. Wade just happened to get mixed up in it.

By Bill Severn

The way he kissed her gave
Sherry no chance to answer.

It was just a little after dark. A warm spring wind frisked her chestnut hair and ruffled her green taffeta gown against the firm, lithe loveliness of her figure, but Sherry hardly noticed. She paid no more attention to it than to the hurdy-gurdy of a piano from one of the saloons, the rough laughter of men and the lamps flickering from the row of gambling tents that she passed, hunting down Reit for the moment when she could find him alone.

But Wade was in one of the tents and he saw Sherry, who'd halted a second in the yellow box of light that slanted through the open flaps. She caught Wade's glance of recognition. The way he looked at her, she knew he remembered her from the dock and was also remembering how abruptly she had broken up his stroll with the blonde.

She started to move on quickly. Wade tossed aside his cards and got to his feet. But as he did, his elbow struck the lantern. It went over with a crash and a shattering tinkle of glass that splashed the canvas with a shower of oily flame. Instantly, an explosion of orange-red burst across the wall of the tent. Men sprang from the table, upending it in a wild stampede.

It wasn't much of a fire, more shouting than smoke. Recovering from the brief fright which had rooted her there, Sherry slipped into the darkness. She heard the hard crunch of Wade's boots behind her. He walked faster and caught her as she started to run.

His hands clamped to her arms and he swung her around to face him.

"And me with a pair of queens and three aces!" he said. "You're a jinx, that's what. You're—" Whatever he was about to say, Wade never finished. He took another long look at her and blinked, as though dazzled by his good luck. "And what's more," he said, "you owe me a kiss. For the one I never got from the blonde!"

The way he kissed her gave Sherry no chance to answer. Her heart pounded at him furiously, hammering his chest through her ribs, but her hands did nothing but hang on. Sherry got so confused for a minute she didn't know what she was doing, but she realized then that she shouldn't be helping.

She pulled away, getting her breath to tell him off—then losing it again. Deciding it was no time for talk, she headed around and made for the hotel. Wade's easy laughter came after her, chasing her all the way.

UPSTAIRS in her room, she tried to shut her mind to Wade and put it to her problem. More than ever now, she had to get out of Bison. She refused to stay another day.

Then she glanced out at the flat roof which ran along the front of the hotel and had an inspiration. If she waited until nearly morning, when Reit was asleep, she could climb out her window and in through his, get the money without his knowing it and be aboard the early stage traveling east.

The sounds of the night died at last and Bison became quiet. Sherry changed her dress for a shirt and a pair of dungarees which would give her more freedom for climbing. Measuring the drop beneath the window, she silently swung herself over. She held close to the boards, inching along, listening for the slightest whisper of alarm.

She could hear her own breathing, feel the jump of her pulses. Her heart pounding, she stiffened and dropped low once more as her eyes caught a tiny glow from the walk below. A man was strolling past, his head back and his hands in his pockets as he idly looked up at the stars. He began to whistle softly, but the whistling stopped after a bit and he moved away. Sherry drew nearer Reit's window. The gambler was snoring, a steady-spaced rumble and wheeze.

Lifting herself noiselessly into his room, Sherry found Reit's pants over the foot

of the bed. Her fingers nervously went through them. A handful of small change spilled from the pocket, clattering to the rough plank floor like buckshot in a tin pail. And then everything busted loose.

Reit woke with a yell, sitting bolt upright in bed. Swearing, he struck out at her, shouting at the top of his lungs. Sherry leaped through the window and tumbled across the roof. There was no chance to make it back to her room. Hanging from the edge while the swinging weight of her body tore at her shoulders, Sherry kicked back her legs and jumped to the ground.

She landed hard, stumbled to her feet, managed to reach the side of the hotel. The whole town came alive. Doors slamming, men running, lights springing up in the shacks and tents, voices gruff with broken sleep.

Sherry pressed against the wall, aware that the shadows wouldn't hide her long. If she could get behind the hotel to the wagons in the yard, she might find a place that would conceal her. Cautiously, she moved to the rear of the building. The moonlight was bright there, but she had to risk it.

She ran smack into the arms of a man who stepped out from the wagons.

It was Wade. He held her, shaking his head. "You!" he said. "I might have known."

"Please . . ." Sherry clung to him. "I'm not a thief."

Wade's expression sobered as his eyes searched hers. "Over here." He pulled Sherry with him. His arm came around her shoulders and the other under her knees as he lifted her up into a wagon and threw a tarpaulin over her.

"Keep under that," he said, "until I see what this is about."

The excitement was a long time quieting down. As Sherry lay huddled there, she heard Wade go around to the front of the wagon at last, and then there was the clank of metal and the slap of leather, the scuff of a horse's hoofs. The wagon bucked. Bracing herself, Sherry realized Wade was hitching up.

"We're getting out of here," Wade told her when she raised her head. "I reckon you need somebody to look out for you, and I need a wife. Came to Bison to get me one. My claim's cleared and I've got the start of my cattle. The house is built and there's a place for a woman in it. If you can cook, I might be persuaded to give you a home."

The wagon began to roll with a bump. It gathered speed, bouncing one way and then the other, the wheels grinding as Sherry fought to hold on. But his words did more to throw her than the jolting of the wagon. Wade couldn't be serious. Sherry tried to see his face. There was a slight hint of that grin, nothing more.

"Now, wait a minute." She found it hard to argue with the back of his neck, jouncing around as she was. "If you think—"

"What I think is that you're not safe in Bison," he cut her off. "Don't set your hopes too high on the rest. I'll have to consider it right careful."

He stopped after awhile, when they were well beyond town. Sherry moved up front with him, hesitantly. Maybe he was just talking to amuse himself, but she had to put him straight.

Sherry told him who she was and what had happened and why she hated the valley. Wade went on driving and gave her no answer, unless it was in the way he glanced at her now and then, but she couldn't pin down what was in that.

"Could drive you on to Rising Wolf," he said finally. "If you feel as you do against settling in the valley, I might as well try my luck there." Wade shrugged. "Gave me a month to get a wife and I reckon I've about run out of girls in Bison. 'Course, if you change your mind . . ." He let the sentence hang there.

HE wagon took an upward course, the narrow road climbing out of the cottonwoods and aspens toward the crowned firs which sloped the hills and down the other side. There was a sudden grade. Wade slowed the horse at the bottom of the dip as the lantern revealed the sandy bed of an almost-dry stream.

"What are we stopping for?"

"Better have a look." Wade got out, but his wide grin made her wonder.

He walked to the edge, picked up a stick and stepped across the rocks to measure the depth of the water. "Kind of soft down there," he said, coming back. "Maybe we shouldn't try to cross it in the dark. Be light in a few hours and we can see what we're doing."

"I'll walk," Sherry told him. "The wagon won't be so heavy."

"Even so, I don't think we should risk it." He rubbed his chin. "Could camp right here. I mean, since we've got no special hurry."

"I'll hold the lantern." She got down. "Then, you can see."

"Well, I still figure—"

"Don't figure, Wade." Sherry's eyes met his. "Just get us over."

"Why, sure, honey."

He patted her arm. His hand rested there a shade longer than necessary, and Sherry thought for an instant he was going to kiss her again. She stiffened, her heart quickening as she drew back, her breath stilled and the pulses throbbing at her temples and in the hollow of her throat. But he didn't try anything. He only grinned and turned away.

Sherry took the lantern and her hand wasn't too steady, holding it. Walking ahead of the horse, bridging the rocks to keep her feet dry, she was conscious of Wade a step behind her. He was moving backwards, leading the animal by the reins.

There was a loud plop, a splash and a grinding crunch.

Sherry whirled around. Wade was up to his hips in water and the front wheels of the wagon were tipped crazily as the horse strained against the pull.

"I'm all right," Wade said. "Slipped, that's all."

Slipped into the only deep pool of the crossing! If Wade had staked it out, he couldn't have stumbled into it better. And the wheels hadn't twisted like that by accident.

Sherry went back slowly. She looked at the wagon and then at him. "I'll push," she said, "and you keep pulling. It won't get us anything standing here."

"No, I reckon not."

Putting her shoulder to the wagon, Sherry shoved. Wade was doing a lot of grunting up front, but the wagon just rolled once and then settled back. Sherry threw herself against it. The wheels rocked deeper into the sand.

"Might as well let it go." He came around. "Have to wait till morning so I can wedge a log under it."

"You'll wedge a log now!"

"But it's too dark—"

Sherry faced him. "You picked the spot and made sure we hit it," she accused.

"Why would I do that?" Wade put his arm around her. "Now, you just go up there to higher ground. I'll unhitch the horse."

HERRY had no choice, but she kept her distance as Wade tied the horse to a tree beside the stream. "Could have a fire," he said. "Seems to be getting right cool."

"We won't be that long." Sherry stood at the edge of the circle of light from the lantern. "Wade, I—we—"

"Hungry?" He went on fixing a fire, building a cone of sticks and then another over it, feeling his shirt pocket for a match. "There's some salt meat and hard biscuits in the wagon. And coffee."

"No, thanks."

"Relax, honey. What are you so upset about?" He tossed her another grin. "Nothing to do. Might as well make yourself comfortable."

"It—it's almost morning now." Sherry watched the flames catch, crackling up through the wood.

"I don't know." He glanced at the sky. "That gray could be rain coming in. Lots of clouds. Reckon I'd better get the tarp and a couple of blankets."

Wade made two trips to the wagon. He dropped the things beside the fire. "Here." He held out the frying pan. "Like I said, I want to find out if you can cook."

"I can't." Sherry pressed her hands flat to her sides. "I can't sew or keep house or do anything you want, so you'd better forget—"

"Oh, now." He laughed. "Let's not give up without trying."

He let it go, then, hardly paying her any attention as he fried the meat and warmed the biscuits in the fat. The appetizing smell of food blended with the strong aroma of coffee. Sherry's hunger grew as she remembered the meager lunch she had eaten hours before and the supper she had gone without.

Hesitantly, she moved closer. Wade flipped a cut of meat on the tin plate and it sizzled invitingly.

"Only got one knife," he said over his shoulder. "Mind if I cut yours for you?"

"No," she answered weakly. And then, "Here, let me."

It tasted wonderful. The coffee was strong and the biscuits edible, even if she could make better. Warmed by the fire, feeling its glow play over her, Sherry gradually relaxed. Wade talked some about his ranch and she about the home she had left in Kansas, and the tension was lost from the little silences between their words.

Above them, the stars were gone and there were broad cloud-streaks of gray. With a lulled sense of cozy contentment, Sherry found her hand in his. Tomorrow, she would put a stop to this. There was no sense to it, no meaning. Wade had nothing she wanted and all she didn't want. And even if she loved him, Sherry would be no good to Wade, hating this land in which he had built his dreams. But now, for just a little while . . .

Sherry closed her eyes when he kissed her. His arms were gentle and his lips were sweet, asking now and not demanding, searching, seeking, finding the tender urgency of her own responsive willingness. And the excitement came within her again, but not the fear, an eagerness of emotion that lifted all through her as she gave her mouth to his.

Wade kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her throat, the soft tendrils of her hair as his lips brushed the shell of her ear with a whispering of her name. The warmth of his breath tickled there and she laughed huskily, pressing closer into his arms.

Sherry didn't hear the spit of the fire, but the flying coal struck her like a bolt of forked lightning.

"Oo—ow—ouch!"

She arched like a bow string and snapped away from him, making like an Indian War Dance as she slapped at herself, her hands beating the sparks that had caught and started to smoke.

Wade grabbed her up and carried her a few steps to the stream. There was a brief hiss as he dunked her into the shallow water. Sherry sat while it soaked her, getting her breath and thinking about what happened to girls who played with fire.

Looking up, she saw the momentary concern in Wade's eyes dissolve into laughter. Sherry shook her head and she was laughing, too.

She backed around from him as she got to her feet, feeling the sudden cool rush of the wind. Wade picked up a blanket and wrapped her in it. He took her over to the fire, but not so near. He brought her another cup of coffee and she shivered a little as she huddled there.

A drop of water touched her nose and another struck her cheek. There was a rustling patter in the leaves above and then it grew louder as the rain came. All at once, the clouds broke and it washed down in a slanting torrent of storm.

WADE raised his head and studied the sky. He was still grinning as he turned to her, but he let out his breath slowly. "What next?" He spoke like he might be asking himself, *What more can you get us into?*

He had hardly settled himself under the tarp with her, holding it over them like a tent, when the stream gave an answer. What had been the dry bottom swelled with a river of water, frothing down from the mountain. In the full fury of a flash flood, it swirled through the gap with a roar, scattering sticks and shale ahead of it.

They dropped the tarp and scrambled back to safety. The fire was washed out and the torrent reached higher. Neighing in terror, the horse strained at the leather which held him to the tree. Wade brought the animal up to higher ground.

Standing there with Wade's arm around her while she clung to him, Sherry heard the wagon crash against the rocks. Then the flood swept the wreckage away.

And then, as suddenly as it had come, the crest of flood moved on. The river remained deep, but eddying in calmer pools. The rain still fell, but it was just rain now.

But this was the sort of thing that happened out here in the West. The flash flood, and the whole wild night before it, were part of the perilous life Wade had to offer a bride. Sherry wanted no part of it. Drenched to the skin, cold, and emotionally worn thin, she could hardly wait to get

back to Kansas and the safe life there.

"I reckon that settles one problem," Wade said cheerfully. "Don't have to worry about the wagon."

"Maybe you'll enjoy walking." Sherry moved back from him. "I won't." Her eyes filled and she was afraid she would cry. "Do you still want to know why I hate it here? Why every minute longer I stay in the valley is like—"

"Hey . . ." Wade held her shoulders gently. "It's not that bad. We've still got the horse."

"He—he'll probably break a leg."

Wade laughed. "Take it easy, honey." He patted her arm. "Like I said, my place isn't far. We'll ride up there and you can get some rest, fix yourself up a bit. Then, if you still want to go to Rising Wolf—"

"I want to go now."

"Sherry, I'm just thinking what's best for you." He tried to kiss her.

"Don't!" She twisted away.

He dropped his hands and stood looking at her a second. Without speaking, he went to the horse. Throwing a blanket across it, he used his knife to cut the wagon reins shorter and fashion the leather into makeshift gear.

Then he boosted Sherry up and swung on behind her. His arms came around her, but they were very impersonal.

THE early morning sun was bright when they came out on the high bluff above Rising Wolf. Blinking into it, Sherry realized she must have dozed off awhile. She also discovered that she was snuggled against Wade's shoulder.

She sat up straight, trying not to think of that long ride through the night, when she had tried to hold herself away from him against the swaying of the horse, her senses conscious of his nearness despite the resolve of her mind.

Now he grinned at her. "I've been figuring," he said. "You'll be needing money for your keep. And finding work maybe won't be easy."

"I don't need anything." She faced straight ahead. "I can take care of myself."

"Just thought if you want a job, I might have one."

"You?"

"Well, look at it this way," he said. "You won't marry me. So, all right. You know what your mind's set on, and so do I. Might be I could do better, but roughly speaking, you're my type of woman. Now, you could spot another girl like yourself easier than I could—somebody you think is right for me—and arrange to get us introduced. Save me a lot of bother."

Sherry swung all the way around, staring at him. "You want to hire me to—to get you a wife?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Plenty. I've never heard such—such a—"

"Only sensible, that's all." Wade shrugged. "Tell you what I'll do. You get me one I like and I'll pay your fare back to Kansas for you."

He expected her to refuse, that was it. This was another way of trying to make her admit she was in love with him herself. But she didn't want him; she did want to get to Kansas.

Wade was bluffing, of course. He would back down fast if she called him on it. Sherry asked, "You're serious?"

"Why, sure."

"All right." She watched for the shock in his face. "It's a deal."

But the surprise was hers. Wade didn't bat an eye.

"Swell, honey." He patted her arm. "Should have thought of it before. All the time I wasted with those gals in Bison when I could have hired somebody to do my scouting for me. Not that it wasn't fun, but the sooner I get back to my ranch . . ."

"And the time you wasted with me?"

"Wasn't wasted," he said. "Not if I get a wife out of it—one way or another."

Sherry drew her breath. For no reason at all, she felt like slapping him hard.

"It'll cost you more than my fare," she told him. "I'll need clothes and a room at the hotel and all my expenses. I'll need—lots of things."

"Hang the cost!" Wade flicked the reins. "Let's get on into town. I'm kind of anxious to see what gorgeous female you can dig up."

Rising Wolf, she guessed, was pretty much the same as Bison. Shacks and tents and maybe a few more permanent buildings, the flotsam of homesteaders bringing their trade. But she didn't really see much of it, riding in with Wade. Sherry told herself there was no cause for personal resentment. She shouldn't care; she didn't care. She should thank her luck she had met a fool.

Wade helped her down in front of the hotel, and maybe it was only habit, but his arms stayed around her longer than necessary.

Sherry stepped back. She still couldn't believe he meant to go through with it. "If this is a joke, you can stop laughing now," she said. "I mean to hold you to your word, Wade."

"You've got it." He gave her his hand. "I reckon it'd be less embarrassing for you if you settled your own expenses and bought what you want." Wade took a wallet from his hip pocket. "Sort of a down payment, Sherry."

She looked at the money he held out to her and then looked again at him.

"That's not enough?" Wade added more. "If you run out, let me know. Now, you go ahead and do your shopping."

"Wade, I can't promise I'll—"

"Long as you try." He nodded and leaned over quickly. Lightly, swiftly, he kissed her cheek. "Just to seal the bargain, honey."

He went up the steps and across the porch into the hotel without glancing back. The door swung shut behind him. Sherry lifted her hand like she was going to hurl the money after him. Her fingers tightened and she shut her eyes.

WITH the bills still clenched in her fist, Sherry strode up the street. When she spotted the sign that said: *Madame Frauncey—Modiste,* she marched inside and told the doll-sized redhead who came from the rear of the shop, "I want to see some gowns. I want a lot of them. And hang the cost!"

She bought stockings and lace-frilled petticoats, red rosebud garters and two taffeta parasols, and everything else she saw that was expensive, until Madame Frauncey began to beam as if Christmas had come to Rising Wolf out of season. Sherry selected one of the dresses and put it on in the back room.

"You can bring the rest over to the hotel," she said. "Now, where shall I go to buy hats?"

The millinery shop was the other side. But Sherry's mood had calmed some by then and she spent Wade's money less recklessly. The girl who waited on her reminded Sherry of the blonde she had dumped into the river with Wade in Bison. A little taller and more buxom, and also more talkative.

Her name was Maye Otter and her uncle was mayor and she asked Sherry hopefully, counting the money for two hats, "Will you be in town long?"

"Not if I can help it," Sherry told her. "I'll wear this hat. Will you please deliver the other to the hotel?"

Sherry went back to the hotel then, signing the register and paying for the room in advance. She took one final fling at luxury.

"Can I have something to eat sent up?" she asked. "Two boiled eggs and toast. A pot of coffee."

But her conscience began to bother her as the clerk led the way upstairs. Wade

had asked for it, but she didn't feel right about what she had done. By the time the food was brought in, Sherry had lost her appetite. She merely nibbled the toast, sipped the coffee, then pushed it away.

There was a knock at the door. Sherry opened it and found Wade, but with a difference. He had been to the barber and obviously had done some shopping himself. A pearl-buttoned shirt, a gleaming silver-studded belt, boots slicked as if they had never seen dust.

Wade seemed to be thunder-struck by what the new dress did for Sherry. His eyes touched over her and came back slowly for more. But whatever he was thinking, Wade didn't say it. He said instead, "Any luck?"

She drew in her smile. "You *are* in a hurry."

He shrugged. "Just thought I'd check. Reckon we both want to get it done soon as we can. I figured—" He halted as somebody moved up to the doorway behind him. Turning, Wade stepped aside, smiling broadly. He winked at Sherry, as much as to say she'd been holding out on him.

It was Madame Frauncey, her arms stacked with the things Sherry had bought, looking small and helpless behind the pile of bundles, and pretty, too.

"Here," Wade said, taking them from her. "Let me."

"Why, thank you." The redhead gave him a swiftly appraising glance, her attention lingering as he put the packages on the chair. Her hand went to her hair with a little self-conscious gesture.

"Fast work, honey," Wade whispered to Sherry as he straightened. "I knew you'd come through."

"She owns the dress shop across the street." Sherry swallowed. "Madame Frauncey isn't—"

"Allow me to introduce myself," Wade interrupted. "Wade Larimer. I sure appreciate your being so helpful to Sherry. She's on her way to Kansas and she did want the right clothes for the trip." He laughed. "Poor child, traveling alone. I'm afraid I'm not much use to her. But you see, Sherry and I are old family friends. I was headed down this way on—uh—business of my own, and I sort of promised to see she got started safely."

"How thoughtful," the redhead said sweetly.

"Maybe you can help me with what I have in mind," Wade said, taking her arm and leading her out. He glanced around. "Don't get into any trouble, child. Better keep to the hotel. I won't be long."

Sherry counted to ten twice and then slammed the door. Facing it, her hands on her hips, she called Wade things no child would know. She went to the window and watched them cross the street, Madame Frauncey smiling up at Wade. Sherry jammed the hat on her head, picked up a parasol as if she wanted to drive stakes with it, and stormed out of the hotel.

SHE had no place to go, but she was darned if she would keep to her room because Wade had told her to. Sherry found herself marching around the block past the dress shop, her head high, but taking a quick squint through the curtained window just the same. There was no sign of Wade and she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her there. She hurried on, slowing only slightly as she went by the side window.

It was long enough. Wade was in the back room, seated on the couch with Madame Frauncey, one hand latched to a tea cup and the other arm already making its way around her shoulders. He looked up and discovered Sherry outside. Behind the redhead's back, Wade lifted his finger and thumb in a circle, to signal he was doing all right.

If she had been watching what she was doing, Sherry wouldn't have stepped out so

blindly into the street. Too late, she saw the wagon coming down upon her. A prancing white horse was trotting out of a cloud of dust, the spinning wagon wheels picking up speed even as they headed toward her.

The driver shouted a cry of warning. Sherry screamed. She threw herself forward, her parasol flying and her hat skittering off into the wind as she tumbled to the earth.

She lay there a minute, scared and dazed, but a lot more mad than hurt. Before she could untangle herself from the twisted confusion of skirt and ruffles, Wade came slamming out of Madame Frauncey's on the run. He lifted her to her feet, his arm steadying her and his eyes worried.

"You all right, Sherry?"

"I—I think so." She leaned against him. "Just dizzy."

Half of Rising Wolf seemed to be clucking around them, wondering what bones she had broken. But the excitement gradually died as they realized she was still in one piece.

Wade grinned a bit then. "Trouble," he said. "Soon as I turn my back." He shook his head slowly. "Come on, I'll take you to the hotel."

"You needn't bother!" She drew away as Wade started to help her brush off the dust. "I'm perfectly able to—"

"Just when I was beginning to get acquainted with Coral," he said, taking her arm and leading her to the walk. "We'll never get me a wife this way. Can't you sit somewhere peaceful like, without touching off a riot?"

"Coral?"

"Madame Frauncey. She's a widow. Got a little money of her own, too. Only thing that bothers me is she's had three husbands." Wade scratched his chin. "I'd sort of like to know what happened to them."

Sherry thought of a few things that should happen to *him*, like hanging maybe, or lead poison. She was about to reply when the blonde came gushing up beside her. Maye Otter from the millinery shop.

"I'm so glad you weren't hurt," she told Sherry. "I saw you fall and I was simply petrified. Honestly, I was. I had a cousin once who—"

"Could have been bad," Wade interrupted. "She's a lucky little girl. I was just telling Sherry this country out here isn't like Kansas. She should be more careful."

Sherry introduced them frigidly. She glared at Wade an instant and added, "He's an—old family friend."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Larimer." Maye smiled. "You don't expect to be in Rising Wolf very long?"

"Well, that depends."

Sherry looked from him to her and back again. She said, "Excuse me." They both nodded vaguely and Sherry went into the hotel. She climbed the stairs to her room and slammed the door. The key popped out of the lock and fell at her feet. Sherry gave it a kick that sent it flying across the room.

IT SEEMED to Sherry the longest day of her life, waiting alone through the afternoon and into the early evening dusk that finally settled over Rising Wolf. Waiting for what, she didn't know. Maybe her ticket to Kansas.

Just a girl going quietly pruny, so bored with herself she could cry. Safe and sheltered and with nothing more violent around her than the buzz of a lazy fly on the rim of the washbowl. She felt like tossing a shoe through the window to hear the crash, hiring a horse and racing it out into the hills with the wind in her face and her hair flying wild.

But it wasn't that. Sherry knew what it was. Wade. She had a long time to think about him and she couldn't think about anything else. Wade's arms holding her close, his kiss taking hers. His strength

protecting her from the dangers which had seemed so big and now seemed so small.

The light tap on the door broke her thoughts. Sherry scrambled out of the chair and half-stumbled in the quick excitement that filled her.

But pride slowed her steps. Why should she run to a man who made a bargain with her to get himself a wife, who took his romance as it came? Last night with her; all afternoon with Coral or Maye.

"Who is it?"

"Me," Wade said.

Sherry let him in, and she couldn't quite tie down her smile or the welcome that ran in her pulses at seeing him.

"Figured you'd want to know," he told her. "You're practically on your way to Kansas."

"Oh!" She glanced down. "So—soon?"

"Well, you did kind of rush me a bit. Throwing me two at once that way. Nothing's settled, of course. But I reckon it won't be too long." His hands touched her shoulders. "And I've got you to thank for her, Sherry."

"But you can't—" Sherry halted and tried again. "Wade, I—I don't think she's the girl for you. I mean, I wouldn't want to feel I was to blame for hurrying you into the wrong choice."

"You're the one who was in a hurry," he said. "Thought you'd be right glad to have it settled."

"A widow with three husbands." She raised her head. "A flibberty-gibbet who'd run out on homesteading in a week, longing for the doings in town. Why, I'll bet she—"

He laughed. "I don't mean Coral. I'm sort of saving her for a spare." Wade sighed heavily. "Maye Otter. Now, there's a honey would make any man feel like getting hitched. I'm taking her to the dance tonight, Sherry. They're throwing a shindig down at the courthouse." His grin filled in hopefully. "All you've to do is wish me a moon. I'll take care of the rest."

"Just because she's—attractive doesn't mean she'll make a good wife, Wade. Will she cook for you and keep your house and darn your socks and make you a home?"

"She'll learn. I can overlook a few things. Be fun teaching her."

Wade's arm slipped around Sherry and he gave her an easy hug. He gave her a peck of a kiss, like an old family friend, and Sherry closed her eyes, remembering how much better Wade could do.

"Got to get going," he said. "Wouldn't want to keep her waiting."

Sherry closed her door slowly, not slamming it, but the quiet click of the knob echoed through the room. Standing there, she felt the tears on her face, streaking her cheeks.

She quit lying to herself then. Whatever she had in Kansas, she wouldn't have Wade. And without him, nothing would be worth having, wherever she lived. With Wade, she could face the hardships. Fires and floods and guns and runaway horses. What else could happen that he wouldn't bring her through safely, that they couldn't face together, making it an adventure as they built their own security on love?

It wasn't too late; it couldn't be. Sherry had taken him from the girls in Bison and she could take him from the girls in Rising Wolf. And to hell with her pride. Wade was her man and she wanted him. Sherry tossed back her hair and defiantly wiped her eyes. If Wade was going dancing, so was she. If he wished for a moon, she could use that, too.

SHERRY washed the red from her eyes and combed out her hair, took her time making herself beautiful. She chose the loveliest of the gowns she had bought, the whispering black taffeta with its low neck and snugged-in waist, the swirling skirt which would show a frill of white ruffles beneath it. Taking a look at herself in the mirror, Sherry winked and smiled.

And there was a moon. The gay music floated out to her as Sherry approached the courthouse, a fiddle waltzing to the piano's melody and the tromp of boots keeping time. Sherry stood in the doorway a moment, watching the swing and glide of the dancers, looking for Wade. The benches had been shoved back to clear the floor, and the rough-beamed ceiling was criss-crossed with brightly colored streamers.

She saw him then. Maye was with him, hanging on his arm as Wade ladled her a cup of punch from the bowl on the long table against the wall.

Sherry started toward them, fixing a casual smile on her face. She missed a step and blinked as Coral came up on the other side of Wade.

Maybe Wade hadn't expected that, either. Being flanked by the pair of them, he appeared uncomfortable and not too happy. The grin he shared, first with Maye and then with Coral, seemed slightly forced, as though the situation might prove embarrassing.

Then Wade saw Sherry. He excused himself quickly and came over to her. "What are you doing here?"

"I got tired of sitting in my room." She lowered her eyes. "I thought the dance might be fun."

He was silent a moment and she could feel the way he was studying her. "Might as well join us." He took her arm. "Like something to drink?"

"You needn't bother with me." Sherry shook her head, but she went with him. "Really, Wade, I'll keep myself amused. I don't want to interfere with—"

"Matter of fact, you can help," he broke in, his voice low. "Won't do any harm to get Maye a bit jealous."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you want that ticket to Kansas . . ." Wade let it go, putting back his grin as he spoke to the others. "Sherry, you know Maye . . . and Coral."

This wasn't the way Sherry wanted it. But she couldn't say, "Wade, I love you. You can stop chasing Maye and Coral. If you want a wife, you can have me—and never mind Kansas." Even if she had no pride, she couldn't tell him that, right out.

The music began again and she found herself dancing with Wade, his arms swinging her close and his eyes holding hers, his mouth so near she could feel the touch of his breath against her own lips.

"Maye's watching," Wade said. "Hasn't taken her eyes off us."

Sherry's heart lost the tune. Her feet went on, but her heart couldn't beat to the gay lilt of the fiddles.

"Wade, I—" She felt the blush climb in her face, but she told him, "It's warm in here. Why don't we step outside for a minute?"

"Good idea." He led her through the doorway. "I hope Maye's not missing this."

Sherry slipped her hand into Wade's and her shoulder brushed his as they strolled under the trees, past the shadows of other couples who had wandered out beneath the moon.

But there was a low rumble. Like thunder, only not that. The earth trembled with it an instant, the vibration tingling upward, shaking her with a momentary dizziness. "Wade!" Sherry threw her arms around him. "What—what was that?"

"Somebody blasting stumps, most likely."

"At night?"

"Could be." But Wade was looking down at her. His hands tightened and then he dropped them slowly, clearing his throat as he glanced away. "I reckon we'd better not carry this too far, Sherry. Having Maye jealous is one thing. But it won't do to get her sore. Not if you want—" His words broke. "Sherry . . ."

He pulled her close and kissed her, not gently. Wade's arms took her like he would never let her go, fighting to have

her for himself alone, to keep her there with him forever.

"It's no use trying to pretend," he said. "Honey, don't you know I don't love anybody but you? I figured I could make you see that was how it should be. I never thought you'd go through with this. But it's no good against your hate—your fear. You won't let yourself fall in love."

"Wade." Sherry pressed her face hard against his chest. "Oh, Wade."

"I know," he told her. "All you want is Kansas." Wade moved back. He took the wallet from his pocket. "Okay." His voice was flat, the tone dead. "Here's your fare. There'll be a stage leaving in the morning."

"No!" Sherry caught his hand. "I'm staying, Wade—with you." She saw his disbelief, the wonder and the hope. Sherry reached up and she kissed him, telling him that way, making him understand.

The earth shook with a louder rumbling and then a roar. Somebody yelled, "Earthquake!"

There were shouts and screams and a wild confusion in the courthouse, an echoing clamor through the town. Here and there, a window shattered. A few horses broke free and a couple of shacks tumbled down. But as earthquakes went, it wasn't much of one.

Anyhow, Sherry wasn't afraid. She clung to Wade and she felt fine.

"Did you have to do that?" Wade grinned. "Couldn't you settle for a small tornado or something?"

"I'll try . . ."

"Not right now." He laughed and pulled her by the hand. "Long as you shook the town out of bed, we might as well find us a preacher. Probably be a blizzard to snow us in before morning."

"Mmmm," Sherry said. "Maybe."

"It's no mystery to me!"

SAYS STAN WARREN, PRIVATE EYE

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HONEY OF A SADDLE-PARD

Lora took a chance on playing with fire—
to warm up her cowboy's cold, cold heart.

THE eight hay ricks had flared up like huge torches, their flames rioting toward the Arizona stars. Now they were only eight golden cones casting a reddish half-light over the meadow clearing.

Just inside their glow Lora Wilson sat her roan mare while she watched Tug Munroe wearily thank the neighbors who had helped him fight the fire. When they had gone, his broad shoulders drooped disconsolately; his brown face was drawn with despair over this last catastrophe. For a month he had been badgered by one fire after another. First, his summer range down valley had been swept from end to end with a disastrous blaze. Then his winter range in the sheltered eastern hills and gone up. And now the hay ricks, his last bit of fodder for his starving herds, had been burned.

He didn't seem to notice that Lora was still there, looking extra-pretty in the firelight, with her hair lighted to gold and her cheeks flushed pink. She longed to ride over and comfort him, because she loved him and felt an ache in her heart for him. But pride kept her back. In his eyes she was just a child—"the little Wilson girl."

Even when Tug was a gangly-legged boy, Lora had adored him. He summed up all her girlhood dreams. But never once had he given her the slightest glance of encouragement. To the love that tore her heart and illumined her face when she was near him, Tug was stone blind.

Presently he came over past her, carrying some buckets toward the ranch house. His face was ash-streaked and desperate. Lora couldn't suppress her desire to say a word of encouragement.

"Tug, I'm awful sorry about the hay."

He glanced up, smiled at her for an instant, then lapsed again into grimness. "Something mighty peculiar about these fires," he mused. "They can't *all* be accidental."

"What're you going to do about the cattle?" She gestured down valley, from which surged the sound of continuous, hungry lowing.

"Only one thing left to do. Tomorrow I'm shunting 'em up to Rain Basin Valley. It's my only chance."

Lora felt like drawing his head into the crook of her arm and telling him not to worry—that even if he lost his ranch and cattle and got to be dirt poor, she'd love him anyway. But the words went unsaid. Her love meant nothing, less than nothing, to him. Lora turned her face away from the firelight to hide the tears that sprang to her eyes. . . .

In her own small 'dobe plastered bedroom, Lora lit the lamp and hung her Stetson on a peg behind the door. Feeling tired and discouraged, she sat down on the edge of the iron cot and absent-mindedly began

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This was her moment at last. . . .

By Dee Dunsing

to unlace her boots. Her little lamp flickered, and a night-flying bug banged against the pane.

The bug banged again, louder. The sound was like two quick taps of a finger.

Startled, she looked up. Beyond the glass she saw the vague whiteness of a face.

"Jed!" she reproached in a low angry tone. "What're you doing here—at this hour?"

"I want to talk to you," came the hoarse, whispered answer.

Lora slipped softly out of her door and around to the cottonwoods back of the cabin. Jed Quirk's bulky figure towered black in the moonlight. Dimly she could see the rage on his dark face.

"You saw me over at Tug Munroe's—why didn't you speak to me?" he demanded jealously.

"I didn't know you were there, Jed."

While she waited absently for his answer, she was drinking in the wasted glamour of the night around her and wishing that this man were Tug. The trees in Little Bear Valley were silver-scaled, and the sky was like a gleaming veil stretching away from the moon.

With a sudden motion, before she was aware of what he was doing, Jed pulled her close and kissed her.

She struggled in his arms and at last jerked free. "Jed Quirk, you dirty hound-dog!" she cried. She gave him a push for good measure. "Get away from me!"

Stung with anger, Jed flung back at her: "You'll change your mind pretty soon! When I have lots of money, you'll remember what a fool you were!"

"*You'll* have lots of money!" Lora mocked. "Why don't you go home and tend to your ranch that's all running to seed? Why don't you do something 'stead of always bragging?"

"That's all you know about it," Jed growled. "I'm going to buy Tug Munroe's ranch. The loan's all fixed up at the bank."

Lora frowned, puzzled. What could Jed Quirk do with Tug's property? Tug himself had spent years making the unwieldy ranch pay. In Jed's hands it would be a white elephant.

"I suppose you're going to subdivide the ranch and get a thousand dollars a lot for it?" she taunted.

"No, I'm not," he whipped back, "because I can sell it whole for plenty of money—a lot more money than *you'll* ever see!"

"I'll bet! And who'd buy it?"

He started to answer, then suddenly clamped his mouth shut. "I ain't telling my affairs," he said.

"Oh, all right," Lora breezed back. "Good night."

She went into the cabin and closed the door. For minutes after Jed's horse had thudded away down the trail, she sat upright on the edge of her bed, thinking, putting two and two together. For some unknown reason, Jed wanted Tug's ranch. Somebody was destroying Tug's fodder in an attempt to wreck his herd. If Tug's herd starved to death, Jed could buy the ranch cheap.

It all fitted together with a snap, like a child's puzzle. She understood the whole business. Along with her realization came a wave of excitement and fear. Here it was at last—her lucky break, her big chance. For years she had been waiting for it, dreaming about it, never imagining it would come like this. . . .

"WHY, Kitten, what you doing here again?" Tug's voice was blurred with sleepiness, and hair stood up in tousled spikes. "Any trouble over at your place?"

"No, Tug." Lora felt panicky. Could she ever convince him what she was going to say was serious? He always laughed at her, or pulled a curl of her hair. When she told him this story, he'd think she was just a little girl having nightmares.

"Tug," she said, her voice strained. "Tug, I've got something awfully important to tell you."

Tug grinned. "Well, what's bothering you, kid?"

Lora gripped the walnut stock of her rifle to hide her trembling. "Tug, your beef are starving, aren't they? If you lose this herd, your ranch will go up at the next tax sale, won't it?"

Tug's face hardened. "But I'm not going to lose the herd. Early tomorrow we're driving them to Rain Basin—"

"But what if somebody burns Rain Basin too? They burned your rangeland; they burned your ricks; they aren't going to stop now and let your cows get fed in the basin."

"They won't know about it."

"Please, Tug, listen to me. I know the fellow who's burning your fodder. He wants your ranch." She took a deep breath and blurted out, "It's Jed Quirk."

There was a long silence. Lora's heart and pulse pounded hotly. So much depended on Tug's believing her.

He got up, strode restlessly up and down the room, then stopped in front of her. His voice was deep and throaty, as if something had struck him hard, but his words were the same old big-brother kind: "It was sweet of you to come over here and tell me that, Kitten. But don't you see—Jed Quirk wouldn't have any use for this ranch. He can't keep his own place going. I got twice as many acres—"

She caught his arm. "Please, Tug. Jed told me he could sell the ranch for a big price. Then he shut up and wouldn't say another word."

Tug looked down at her, frowning.

Lora plunged on. "He knows you're taking your cattle to Rain Basin. He was over here, as one of your friends, helping put out the fire tonight. He knows, and he's going to get to Rain Basin before you do.

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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Don't let him, Tug! Don't give him the chance!"

In the little pucker between Tug's brows, Lora read his upset thoughts, his wavering.

"A big price," he mused, trying to puzzle it out. "There was a crazy rumor last month about a tin deposit on the ranch. Nothing to it, though."

"But Jed must've believed it," she insisted. "He means to keep on trying to burn you out."

Tug stared at her as if he couldn't get used to the idea of Jed Quirk burning his fodder.

"He's the one, Tug—I *know* he is. Please—let's ride over to the pass. If he doesn't come through before noon tomorrow, I'll admit I made a fool of myself. You can call me rattlebrained, or muddleheaded, or not-dry-behind-the-ears—you can call me anything, Tug. Only please let's go!"

THEY had traveled under a fading moon, through sharp cold mist that swathed the mountain trails at night. They had watched the sun gild the sky from behind black peaks and then burst dazzlingly above them. After that, the temperature began to climb, the mist melted away, and the sun beat down like a furnace blast.

The trail was indistinct and brush-grown. Probably no one had been up to this lonely valley since the spring roundups. The faint, acrid smell of sage journeyed with them, uphill and down.

In spite of the intense heat they couldn't stop to rest. Not more than half a mile ahead, Jed Quirk and a squat Mexican were jogging along, pointed straight for Rain Basin. From a bluff overlooking the Pass, Lora and Tug had spotted the pair, a little after sunrise, riding leisurely up the trail as if bent on a harmless day of rabbit shooting.

Tug's incredulous, "Well, I'll be danged," had fallen on Lora's ears like exquisite music. But now, as she realized that they were close to their quarry, and that in less than an hour all four of them would be in Rain Basin, a shadow fell across her delight and a chill of fear shook her. What would happen when the four of them met in the valley? They all carried rifles. Would it be Tug or Jed that won out? And if Tug lost—she dared not think of that.

Within a mile the path sheered off abruptly, and they could see up a steep-walled valley. It was like a long trough, with one narrow outlet at the southern end. Fern-hung crevices slit the rimrock, and stubby piñon pines were taking root along the walls. A thick grass carpet, dry now after a hot summer, made the canyon floor look like a placid yellow lake.

Jed and the Mexican were nearly down the rough trail leading into the valley. Lora gasped as Jed took something out of his pocket and leaned over toward a thick clump of grass.

A winding thread of smoke rose from beside him, and a tongue of fire darted up.

With a muttered exclamation, Tug whipped his rifle out of its saddle bucket, sighted for an instant, and fired. The two men jerked around, startled. Tug fired again. As the bullet whined past, Jed and the Mexican ducked close to their horses and spurred frantically up valley.

Tug kicked his horse in the sides and yelled for Lora to follow him down the slope. Beside the rapidly spreading fire he vaulted to the ground, flung his rifle aside, and jerked out his saddle blanket.

"Help me, Kitten," he cried. "We'll have to hustle to smack this blaze down!"

There was little wind, but the grass was dry, and it flared and crackled like tinder. Panicky rabbits bounded down valley, and a covey of startled quail whirred out of a ferny crevice and vanished over the canyon wall.

Hastily Lora unbuckled her mare's cinch-strap, yanked out her saddle blanket, and

waded into the flames, striking right and left. The quivering red-hot air smothered her and forced her back. Then she waded in again. Her riding breeches were blackened and burned, and her hair and eyelashes were singed. But she didn't care. She was sharing an important, dangerous job with Tug.

Tug was letting her be his partner!

SUDDENLY, without warning, a gunshot rocked through the valley, waking echoes as it crashed against the steep walls. At the same instant a little white cloud of dust blossomed from a boulder not a yard away from Tug.

Lora grabbed her rifle as a second shot rang out and sent Tug's Stetson flying. She fired hastily through the smoke, then jumped behind a clump of pines. When she looked back, she was startled to see Tug still desperately thrashing out the few remaining flames.

"Tug!" she cried, in an agony of fear. "Get under cover!"

As she spoke, another shot crashed through the gorge. Tug dropped flat on the ground and began to inch through the tall grass toward his gun, then toward Lora and shelter. Bullets thudded into the ground beside him, but he crept on.

Jed and the Mexican had located a deadly sniping spot—a ledge halfway up the valley wall. From her place behind the pines, Lora could see the tip of Jed's Stetson stealing up from behind a boulder. His rifle wasn't turned toward them, however, but down valley, toward where the untethered horses were galloping away in a panic. Lora saw her mare stumble, fall kicking around in the grass for a instant. Then it lay still.

Lora swallowed hard. Poor Queen! The sleek mare would never again gallop happily along the sage-scented trails of the range.

"Kitten," Tug ordered sternly, as he crawled into the protection of the pines, "you get out of here before they kill my horse, too. Make a break behind the trees while I pepper 'em. You'll catch my horse up on the home trail. Beat it, kid!"

The command took Lora unaware, and stung like a slap in the face. He was sending her home, just like always.

But this time she didn't shrink back into a corner. Her patience split wide open. She was mad clear through.

"I won't beat it!" she flashed. "I'm no infant, and I won't be treated like one!"

Tug had been settling his gun along the limb of a tree and finding a space in the foliage to sight at his enemies. Now he turned to stare, dumfounded, at Lora. "Why, Kitten—"

"I'm tired of being treated like a baby," Lora went on hotly. "I'm grown up! I put you on the trail of these men—and now, when things are just starting to cut loose, you want to send me home!"

"But this is a rifle fight," Tug protested. "We're in a trap. One of us can still get out, and you're a girl, Kitten—"

"And don't you call me *Kitten!* I'll show you that I can stand just as much and shoot just as well as you can. I'm going to stay here whether you want me to or not. I'm going to—"

She didn't finish, because she saw a sodden red spot on the sleeve of Tug's brown flannel shirt.

"Tug! Oh, Tug!" Her cry was full of agonized self-reproach.

He turned his face away from her. "Never mind, Lora," he muttered.

"Tug, I'm sorry! I didn't mean it. Oh, Tug—you're hurt!" Big tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Don't cry. I'm all right," Tug insisted. Then, pulling himself together: "I got to go round that pair and come down on 'em from above. I'm bleeding bad—don't dare play a waiting game. Can you hold 'em till I get there?"

His words stabbed at her. "Tug, please

don't try to do that. You can't make it!"

"Can you hold 'em, Kitten?" he repeated stubbornly.

"Sure, Tug. I can hold them."

HE CRAWLED away through the grass, and Lora took up her fight. She was scared to the bone, but her small mouth was clamped in a stubborn line. First a shot from one side of the pines; then a quick succession of shots from the other. When the magazine was empty, she reloaded with trembling haste. She must be both swift and careful, because both of their lives depended on her alone. And they *were* partners—real ones now!

With lightning speed she jammed her fourth clip of cartridges into place. But before she could aim, she saw that the fight had veered another way. Her enemies' bullets were turned upward, and puffs of smoke were bursting from the floor of the ledge. Tug had reached the rimrock above the snipers!

Suddenly a shrill cry echoed through the gorge. The Mexican staggered out from behind his shelter and dropped at the edge of the cliff. Horrified at the sight of death, Lora turned her eyes away for an instant. But then, remembering Tug, she resolutely raised her gun. Jed was still firing from his refuge. She mustn't leave Tug to scrap it out alone.

Abruptly a cry burst from her lips. Not fifteen feet above the shelf, Tug had risen out of the brush and was plunging down the trail. He was charging now, running a long chance in order to fight man to man.

Terrified, she screamed to him: "Tug, go back!" But her words ended in a groan as she realized that he couldn't hear—couldn't go back now if he wanted to.

Leaping over brush and rocks, he zigzagged down toward the ledge. Jed fired, but Tug was on top of him, slugging with his fists. The two men rolled over and over. Lora stumbled forward, trying to find an angle to shoot from; but her rifle was useless now.

They fell, and she could see Jed's arm flailing at Tug's bleeding shoulder. Tug countered with a fist to the face. Then Jed's whole body doubled up convulsively and he struck with his knees.

Tug's arms halted, moved laboriously; he failed to stop a hailstorm of blows. Lora saw that he was down; his head lolled inertly to one side.

With a vicious kick, Jed shoved Tug's body toward the edge of the slope. It began to slide. Six feet lower it would plunge off into the air and rocket to the canyon bed. . . .

Time stopped for Lora in that nightmare second, as she realized that nothing she could do—nothing anybody could do now—would save Tug.

Straight down the slope his body rolled, dislodging small pebbles and dirt, bending grasses and shrubs that had taken root there. Then, slantwise, it stopped, caught against some jut of rock hidden in the grass.

Jed began to pick his way hastily toward it. A nudge of his foot would send Tug to the bottom of the gorge.

Lora didn't scream or turn away her eyes this time. Cool and steady, but with hands and fingers like ice, she raised her rifle to her shoulder and took sight. As fast as she could aim and work the bolt on her gun, she fired four times.

Jed struggled to duck as the first two shots came close.

He lost his footing, caught at the grasses as he slid downward. As he passed Tug's body, he grabbed at it and missed.

Gathering momentum, his lanky form whirled and tumbled off the slope. For a long moment it hurtled through the air in a shallow arc. Somewhere on the grassy floor of the valley it struck.

Lora was not listening to the cry that echoed through the gorge. She was hurrying down the canyon to Tug. . . .

A tree toad was shrilling in the black crevice of Little Bear Valley, and a late moon was rising above Rain Basin Pass. On the porch of the cabin Lora and Tug sat together. Tug's shoulder was still bandaged and his face was pale, but his voice was getting back its old deep tones.

"Jed could've finished the herd if he'd had sense enough," he commented soberly. "I'd never have suspected he was going to fire the valley if you hadn't warned me. He shouldn't have throwed the girl into his gamble."

"Yes," agreed Lora, trembling as she accidentally brushed Tug's shoulder. "Now he's lying up there in the hospital, and when he gets out he'll go to jail."

Tug held on to her little finger as she drew her hand away. His touch traveled like fire up her arm and through her body. "Lora," he whispered softly, "I've had plenty of time to do some thinking while I've been laid up. And do you know what was on my mind? What you said in the valley there, when you got mad." He smiled, and Lora thought for a fleeting second that she saw the look in his eyes for which she had waited so long.

"You're awful sweet as a fluffy little kitten," Tug went on, "but I like you best a beautiful, fire-spittin' tiger-cat!"

He took her hand in his. "Lora, would I be making a mistake if I throwed the girl into *my* gamble?"

Lora was suddenly giddy. The words rang confusedly in her brain. Could she believe what he was saying, or was this another of her eternal day-dreams?

"Will you, honey? Will you be a partner to me all the time? Forever?"

She was shaking from head to foot. "Oh, Tug . . ."

His arms closed around her, and his big hand caressed her hair. Underneath his flannel shirt she could feel his heart beating. This was her moment at last, and it was even sweeter than she had imagined. Now she could stop wishing. Now she had the glamorous night, the brilliant silver moon over the valley, the soft night wind . . . and Tug, too.

FOR THE LOVE OF MIKE

Stirring Old-West Novelette

"Let's get it over with," Pete said gruffly.

CHAPTER ONE

Ellen Talks Back

TO ELLEN O'BRIEN, on that August day when she answered the summons of Will Blake, the world was a very sunny place indeed. Her dark curls bobbed with a happy-go-lucky rhythm as she headed for the office, and the smile in her Irish blue eyes fairly lit up the old, unpretentious ranch house.

She let herself into the small corner room used as an office and said brightly, "You wanted to see me?"

Will Blake sat at the desk, his back to

Ellen had defied her guardian
all for the love of Mike.
She didn't aim to lose him now
to any shootin' posse!

By A. C.
Abbott

the open window, a stubby pencil in his gnarled fingers. He lifted his shaggy gray head as Ellen entered, and as usual she felt the penetrating stab of his pale gray-green eyes. But whether or not those eyes approved of what they saw, they failed to say.

Blake was a conscientious man, and during the five years since the death of Ellen's father, he had proved himself a good ranch manager; but he was a cold, unapproachable individual who seemed to think everything in life could be put down in black and white and added up like a column of figures.

"I wanted to see you," he said without inflection. "Been wanting to for several days but been busy. Wayne Lowry wants to marry you."

Ellen's smile was the soft, superior smile of a woman who knows exactly what she wants and fully expects to get it. "That's sweet of him."

"He's a good man," said Blake, studying her narrowly.

"Yes," Ellen admitted, "I guess he is." She put her mind on Wayne Lowry for a moment, a good-looking young man who had always been very nice to her. She shook her head and smiled again. "But not good enough."

"You don't want to marry him?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm going to marry Mike Gordon."

Blake's head jerked up. "Not while I'm your guardian! That's another thing I wanted to see you aout. I was afraid you might be getting an idea like that."

Ellen's sunny world darkened perceptibly. "What's wrong with it?"

"Mike Gordon's no good, Ellen, and he's heading for serious trouble. I want you to stay away from him."

It took a full five seconds for that brutal statement to penetrate Ellen's happy fog. Then the smile in her Irish blue eyes vanished before a flood of Irish temper. "I won't do anything of the kind," she burst out. "Just as soon as Mike gets that ranch on its feet—"

"He's making a show of working that ranch, is he?"

"A show?" Ellen echoed, her mind leaping to the sturdy rock house Mike had built, to the new cottonwood-pole corrals and the wire glistening around the river bottom meadowland.

"A show," Blake repeated. "He's not the first man to use wild horse hunting as a blind to cover up his real business; and it wasn't any accident that he took out the last place on the river, before it sinks into the lava beds."

"Certainly it wasn't any accident," Ellen retorted hotly. "Did you expect him to run wild horses right here in the middle of the valley? The horses are out there in the sage hills and on the flats, and Mike's ranch is handy—"

"It is," Blake interrupted. "Handy to the badlands."

"What do you mean by that?"

Blake said deliberately, "You know as well as I do that the stage running from the mines out to the railroad has been held up four times in the last two months. Maybe you *don't* know that everybody in the country thinks Gordon is doing it. I'd heard the rumors before, but Wayne Lowry told me the other day that the sheriff is sure and is just trying to get the proof."

Ellen tried to get the breath back into her lungs but couldn't manage it. This was the first inkling she had had that Mike was suspected of being anything but an enterprising young rancher who would one day be supplying the whole valley with good, well-broken saddle horses. She whispered hoarsely, "That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" Blake leaned forward over the desk and rammed one rigid forefinger against the wood to emphasize his points. "At each robbery the signs have been the same. One man riding a big horse, and he killed his tracks in the lava beds just beyond Mike Gordon's ranch!"

"That doesn't prove anything." Ellen's face was as hot. "Those lava beds are the logical place for any outlaw to hide. Where else would a man go in this country?"

"To Gordon's ranch," Blake said bluntly. "Use your head, Ellen. Gordon's out there alone all the time. He does a lot of riding—"

"Scouting the wild horses, finding out where they water! Don't you see?"

Blake settled back in his chair, his glance as coldly impersonal as the stare of a stranger. "I see that this has gone farther than I thought, but this is the end of it. Do you understand? You're not to see Mike Gordon again."

"But, Mr. Blake—"

"There's no use arguing. If you've got to have romantic notions about somebody, you'd better turn your attention to Wayne Lowry. He's got a good ranch, and he'll be able to provide you with a good home."

"A one-horse cow ranch," Ellen said acidly, her indifference toward Wayne Lowry suddenly mushrooming into decided animosity. "Is that better than a one-horse horse ranch?"

"I doubt that Gordon has even bothered to provide the one horse—not from the wild herds, anyway."

THAT was too much. Ellen had tried for five years to love this man as a foster father, but she couldn't even succeed in liking him very well. Now his bull-headedness roused every stubborn bone in her body.

"I'm almost eighteen," she began.

"But I'm your official guardian until you're twenty-one."

"For running the ranch maybe, but not for running me."

"Both. Your dad evidently figured you'd be needing help with your personal problems, too."

"But I don't, dang it!"

"You do," Blake said with finality, "if you can't see the truth about Mike Gordon. Wild-horse hunters have always been a wild lot, and this one is headed for the penitentiary—or the cemetery!"

A new idea, horrifying in its possibilities, knocked the wind completely out of Ellen. "Mike doesn't even know what they're saying about him," she said with a rush. "I'm sure he doesn't, or he'd have said something."

She whirled toward the door but was stopped short by Blake's bark.

"Ellen! Where are you going?"

Fear for Mike had made Ellen oblivious to everything except the need to warn him of his danger.

"I've got to talk to him."

"You'll not go near that ranch."

"But, Mr. Blake, he's got a right to know what folks are saying!"

"He knows," Blake said grimly, "but it's a cinch he'd try to keep it from you."

Ellen hesitated, her hand on the doorknob, while a picture of Mike Gordon flashed into her mind as clearly as if the man were standing before her. Lithe and rangy, with a shock of unruly dark hair and a wide grin that made a quick, pleasing splash across his brown face. But it was his eyes that spoke to her out of that picture. As gray as the sage hills, level and direct—they were not the eyes of a liar.

Ellen shook her head. "He doesn't know," she said and started out again.

"Ellen!" Blake slammed one hand onto the desk top. "If you ride out to that ranch again, I'll send you out of the country until this trouble is cleared up. Your dad asked me to look out for you, and I'm going to do it if I have to send you so far away you can't even dream about that damn stage robber!"

Ellen pulled in a deep breath, glaring impotently at her guardian while a hundred protests flew into her throat and lodged there. She knew from past experience that arguing with Will Blake when he was riled was as useless as batting her head against the corral fence. Suddenly unable to

breathe, she stepped out of the office and slammed the door with a violence that shook the whole house.

"Bull-headed old billy goat!" she gritted and headed through the living room toward the front door like a bronc heading for pasture.

Her seething resentment turned then to the handsome head of Wayne Lowry. If he had kept his blasted mouth shut instead of spreading malicious gossip and spouting off about marriage, this crisis wouldn't have developed. Now, Will Blake would do exactly as he threatened, although Ellen couldn't conceive of any place being so far away that her dreams couldn't get back.

What she was going to do about it, she wasn't sure; but she had to get out of the house. She yanked the front door open and charged through the opening as if the house were on fire behind her—and ran head on into Mike Gordon.

Ellen gasped as she bounced back from the impact, seeing Mike's quick, startled grin.

"Whoa!" he blurted. "What's your hurry?"

Ellen felt suddenly as if her heart were upside down in her voice box. Mike's presence usually caused her heart to get out of place; but this time she could only stare at him, remembering Will Blake's harsh ultimatum and knowing that Mike ought to be just anywhere in the world except here on her front porch.

Mike's grin faded as he studied her face, his hat held uncertainly in both big hands. Then he tipped his head for a critical inspection of his clean blue shirt and stiff new levis.

"You look," he murmured, "like I was a ghost fresh out of somebody's haunted house. What's the matter?"

"What—what are you doing here?" she stammered.

"I came to see Blake. Is he here?"

Ellen noted that Mike was wearing a gunbelt at the same time that she saw the queer, unfamiliar glint in his gray eyes. "He's here," she said, speaking so fast she nearly strangled herself, "but you don't want to see him, Mike. He's as cranky as an old bear with fifteen cubs."

"How so?"

"I've got to talk to you," Ellen said, hastily stepping through the door and reaching for his hand.

But Mike stepped aside, deftly avoiding her reaching hand. "I'll talk to him first," he said evenly. "Where is he? In the office?"

"Yes, but he's busy!"

"An interruption won't hurt him any," said Mike and stepped past her into the house.

"Wait!" Ellen jumped after him, grabbing his arm and stopping him long enough so that she could plant herself in front of him. "Please don't go in there, Mike. Mr. Blake and I just had a quarrel, and—and I've got to talk to you."

"Oh, yeah? What did you fight about?"

Ellen flashed a frantic look at the office door. This was neither the time nor the place for a long-winded conversation, and she didn't want to broach the subject of stage robbing until she could assure Mike fully that she didn't believe any part of it. She look up, startled, as his hands closed hard over her arms.

"What's the matter, Ellen?" he demanded. "What's happened?"

"Nothing. It's just that—he's got the fool idea I ought to be paying more attention to Wayne Lowry."

Ellen looked down at the floor, squirming in Mike's grasp.

"So," he said quietly.

"Mike, you know I don't give a hang about Wayne Lowry!"

"Blake told you to stay away from me, did he?"

"Yes, but you know I'm not going to. Listen, Mike—"

"Did he tell you *why* he didn't think I was fit company?"

Ellen's heart stopped beating. She hadn't thought that Mike knew what people were saying about him, but she could tell now from his grim expression that he did know. She wanted to say something, but her tongue was temporarily out of commission.

"So," Mike said again. "Lowry was out at the ranch awhile ago, wanting to buy a horse. Some cracks he made let me know folks thought I was a stage robber, but I was hoping he hadn't peddled that damn hogwash around here."

"Oh, Mike!" Ellen breathed, suddenly as weak as a sick calf. "It is hogwash, isn't it?"

"Sure it is. Nothing else but! I'm—sorry you had to hear it, Ellen."

"That's all right," she said and grabbed him around the neck.

Mike's arms went around her hard and quick and his kiss was almost fierce, setting up a flame in Ellen that burned away every worry she had. Guardians, gossip and gold shipments be darned. This was what she wanted, and it was right.

When Mike finally lifted his head, Ellen laughed breathlessly.

"Oh, Mike, I'm glad you came. I knew it was a bunch of baloney and I wanted to tell you."

The glint hadn't left Mike's eyes, and his next words brought Ellen back to earth with a bump. "And I want to tell Blake! Come on."

He took her elbow.

"Wait, Mike," she pleaded. "You don't know how unreasonable he can be. He won't listen."

"He'll listen," Mike said grimly, "or I'll write the message out on a piece of cardboard and shove it down his throat."

S THEY reached the door, Mike threw it open without slackening his stride and shoved Ellen ahead of him into the cluttered room she had so recently—and rebelliously—left.

Will Blake, still sitting at the desk, lifted his head for one stabbing glance at Ellen before fastening his icy gaze on Mike.

"What are you doing here, Gordon?"

Mike didn't beat around any bushes. "I just found out," he said bluntly, "that some folks got me pegged as a stage robber. How do you feel about it?"

"The same way," Blake retorted. "I don't want you on the place, and I sure don't want you hanging around Ellen. Beat it."

"Now, wait," Ellen said hotly. "Mike came here—"

"—to give you a few facts," Mike finished for her. He planted both hands on the desk and leaned over it, returning Blake's hard stare with compound interest. "Any man who says I've had anything to do with robbing those stages is a liar. I've been too damn busy fencing that strip of meadow along the river and getting my corrals in shape to have time to lug off any gold shipments."

"Improvements," Blake said narrowly. "They cost money—if you've been making them."

"Sure they cost money," Mike said, ignoring the sarcasm, "but they also cost work, and that's what I've been putting out the most of. I'm going to hit the jackpot some time this month."

"Maybe you will," Blake said with cold hostility, "but not out of the horse business. No man can hit the jackpot chasing wild horses."

"He can if he's smart," Mike contradicted, "and lucky. I've already snared enough broomtails in water-hole traps to pay for every improvement I've made on that ranch. The ranch is in the clear, and if this dry weather holds out, before the month is over I'll have it stocked with enough horses to keep me busy for a couple of years, breakin' them."

"How?" Ellen asked breathlessly, momentarily forgetting that Will Blake had forbidden her even to see this man. Mike

had said that when the ranch was "on its feet," he'd be in the market for a wife to make it home. "Oh, Mike," she breathed, getting more excited by the minute. "How?"

Blake gave Mike no chance to explain.

"You don't need to waste any time with your wild yarns, Gordon. You're just trying to fool this girl, and I won't stand for it any longer."

"I'm not trying to fool her," Mike said, holding his voice even although Ellen could hear the anger vibrating in it. "I'm trying to straighten her out, and you too. After Lowry left, I just took time to clean up and then came peltin' over here because—Well, I should have come to you sooner, I guess, but I've been busy. I'm in love with Ellen, sir, and I want to marry her."

"Marry her!" Will Blake came slowly out of his chair, looking like a bull with his eye on a red flag. "Why, you thieving—"

A commanding knock on the front door interrupted him. For a second he stood rigid, glaring at Mike while he seemed to swell up bigger and bigger. Then he jerked a hand at Ellen.

"Go see who it is."

Ellen slid cautiously over to Mike and got a good grip on his hand. "Come on, Mike," she whispered fearfully.

"I'm not through talkin' yet," said Mike.

"Go on, Ellen," Blake said coldly. "Maybe I can make myself plainer if you're out of earshot."

Ellen didn't want to go, at all. She had a horrible feeling that there was going to be an explosion here that would rock the whole house, and she wanted to be on hand to pick up the pieces. Then the knock came again.

Stifling an anxious sigh, Ellen turned out of the room. Mike closed the door behind her, and immediately her guardian's voice lifted in an angry tirade. Ellen couldn't distinguish the words, but her imagination was both agile and frightening. At least, she thought with some measure of comfort, Will Blake was not wearing a gun.

As she opened the door, Ellen was at once both relieved and apprehensive to see Sheriff Larson standing there, dusty, obviously tired and obviously out of sorts. The sheriff was not a big man, but his gray mustache had a belligerent look about it.

"Hello," Ellen said uncertainly.

"Howdy, Miss Ellen," Larson said gruffly, touching his hat brim. "How's chances for a handout? I put my bronc in the barn, and I could shore use a feed myself."

"Sure," said Ellen, stepping back so he could enter. "Trouble?"

"Stage was robbed again last night."

"Oh—really? Did you—catch the robber?"

"No, but I shore got a lot of questions to ask a certain gent when I get him located."

Ellen never had a chance to voice the reluctant question that arose in her. At that moment the muffled report of a gun sounded from the direction of the office, followed by the jar of something falling. For a second Ellen stood rooted, staring at the sheriff in breathless horror. Then panic seized her.

"Mike!" she screamed and made a run for the office door.

CHAPTER TWO

Hot Water

THE sheriff was right behind her. He knocked her out of the way as they burst into the room together. Ellen grabbed at a chair to catch her balance, then froze at the scene before her.

Will Blake lay face down on the floor, the back of his shirt smeared with blood. Beside him knelt Mike, his left hand on the man's shoulder, his right holding his gun.

Ellen sagged into the chair, her mind a complete blank as she stared at Mike. Slowly he looked up, and the expression in his eyes told her that Will Blake was dead.

"Oh, Mike!" she whispered.

Abruptly Mike shoved to his feet and turned toward the window, but he had taken only two steps when the sheriff's metallic voice stopped him cold.

"Drop that gun, Gordon, and get your hands up!"

Mike jerked his head around, seeming to notice the sheriff for the first time. "Wait, Larson," he said.

"I'm through waiting," the sheriff retorted, the gun in his hand holding steady on Mike's back. "You're under arrest for stage robbery *and* murder. Drop that gun or I'll kill you where you stand!"

Ellen flashed a wild, questioning look at the sheriff, gasping as the full significance of this hit her like a ton of brick. The shock of her guardian's death was bad enough, even though she had never felt any affection for him; but that blow could not compare with the one carried in the lawman's accusation.

She heard Mike's gun clatter to the floor and turned in time to see him lift his arms and swing back to face the sheriff.

"Don't get trigger happy, Larson," he said quietly. "Reckon this looks bad at first glance, but I didn't kill Blake. That shot came through the window."

"The window!" Ellen echoed, and nearly collapsed with relief.

The sheriff, however, didn't share her unquestioning confidence in Mike Gordon. "Kick your gun over here," he ordered. "Then you stand almighty still, young feller, while I look at it."

"You'll find an empty in it," Mike said, as he sent the gun skidding across the floor. "I always carry an empty under the hammer."

"Did you see who did it?" Ellen asked anxiously, getting shakily to her feet.

"No. I was standing on the other side of the desk when he got it. By the time I got to the window, there was no one in sight."

"I'll bet there wasn't," Larson said harshly. "This gun's been fired, recently."

Ellen, watching Mike closely, saw his face go suddenly gray.

"Wait," he said, putting out one hand in a guarded gesture. "I forget to tell you I shot at a rattlesnake on the way in, but I reloaded after that. There's still only one empty in that gun."

"Which doesn't prove a damn thing," Larson said flatly, "except that you're a mighty quick liar."

"Aren't you even going to look out there for sign?" Mike demanded. "The killer couldn't have been very far away, but he's gettin' farther by the minute!"

"The killer," Larson retorted, "ain't goin' nowhere except to jail. Turn around and put your hands behind you."

"Dammit, I tell you I didn't kill him," Mike burst out. "We were arguing—"

"Yeah, and I reckon he threw it up to you about these stages you've been robbing. I found the horse you used last night."

The expression on Mike's face mirrored Ellen's astonishment perfectly.

"The horse I used?" he echoed blankly.

"Yeah. This morning I trailed that stage-robbin' gentleman out beyond your place, as usual. Coming back I saw a horse out there in your pasture, a big black, that'd been ridden almighty hard."

Mike blew up. "Sure he'd been ridden hard, you damn blockhead, but not for any stage robbery! I rode that horse—"

He broke off at the sound of boots thudding hurriedly in the living room. The next moment Wayne Lowry appeared in the office doorway, his handsome face tight with excitement, his dark eyes snapping.

"I thought I heard a shot—" Wayne got just that far before he saw Blake lying on the floor. For a second he stared, wide-eyed. "In the back!" he breathed. "And he wasn't even packing a gun." Then he lifted his glance to Ellen, his face twisted with consternation. "Aw, Ellen!"

Ellen heard him, but she was far too much upset over Mike's predicament to be

interested in any expression of sympathy. "Where, Mike?" she asked anxiously. "Where had you ridden that horse?"

Mike hesitated, pulling in a slow breath as he stared at Wayne Lowry. Then he let his breath go in a sigh of weary disgust. "Never mind."

"But, Mike, tell 'em," she expostulated. "I know you didn't rob the stage, but tell *them!*"

"The stage?" Wayne said quickly. "Was it robbed again?"

"It was," Larson grunted, "and I've got the jigger that robbed it."

WAYNE turned from the sheriff to Mike with an expression of smug triumph. "So that's why you wouldn't sell that stud! I was out there awhile ago, Larson. Offered him five hundred dollars for a bay stallion, and he turned it down. I told him he was the first horse-hunter I ever knew that didn't need money, but he said he'd been building up a stake gradually and figured on hitting the jackpot soon. I guess he meant it!"

"Listen!" Ellen cried desperately. "He was talking about horses when he said that. Tell 'em, Mike. Tell 'em what you started to tell Mr. Blake about your plans."

"No," Mike said, with a slow shake of his head. "Looks like I've done too much talking already."

"But, Mike," she said in bewilderment. "If you can explain, for heaven's sake, do it!"

Again he shook his head, and there was a sick expression in his eyes that made Ellen want to cry. "I can't explain," was all he said.

"Let's get out of here," Larson said gruffly. "Put the cuffs on him, Wayne."

Ellen stood helplessly aside as Wayne fastened Mike's hands behind his back. Then she followed like a tongue-tied shadow as they shoved him roughly out of the house and boosted him onto his horse. She was aware, vaguely, that the sheriff was talking to Wayne, giving him instructions; but she was too busy looking at Mike to pay any attention to what was said.

His face was still gray, but his jaw was set and he kept his head up and his shoulders back in spite of the strained position of his arms. Ellen wanted to say something, to assure him again that she knew he wouldn't rob a stage or shoot a man in the back; but all she could think of was the fact that he had said he couldn't explain.

Mike glanced down at her only once, inscrutably, as the sheriff started to lead his horse toward the barn. Then he looked away, out over the sage hills; and Ellen felt as empty as an old broken-down rain barrel.

She was still standing there, staring dismally at the spot where the sheriff and Mike had disappeared, when she became aware that Wayne Lowry had come up beside her.

"Larson asked me to stay."

Ellen started to acknowledge his statement, but her throat ached unbearably and she ended by merely swallowing hard. Instantly Wayne's arms were around her, one big hand pulling her head against his chest.

"Go ahead and cry, honey," he said softly.

Ellen didn't want to cry. She wanted to think. She closed her burning eyes tight and stood rigid in his grasp.

Wayne swore with muffled savagery. "I've been afraid you were going to get hurt, running around with that lobo."

"No," Ellen said faintly. "He isn't a lobo. He came here to tell Mr. Blake that he hadn't robbed those stages."

"And then killed him because he wouldn't believe it!"

"No," Ellen said again. She shook her head fiercely, trying to get her rope on an idea that kept getting away from her. "He didn't kill him. He said that shot came through the window."

Wayne laughed, a harsh expression of ridicule that jarred Ellen out of her trance. Suddenly she shoved back, her eyes wide.

"The tracks," she said tensely. "If we can find the tracks, the sheriff will have to believe him."

"What tracks?"

"The tracks of the killer. Mike wanted the sheriff to cut for sign, but he wouldn't do it. Mike said—"

Ellen broke off, stopped cold by the queer, pitying light in Wayne's eyes.

"Ellen," he said, shaking her gently, "do you believe a wild yarn like that?"

"Mike said it," she replied, as if that were proof enough that it was true. She twisted sharply out of Wayne's grasp, glaring at him with all the frustrated defiance she felt. "And Mike's never lied to me yet!"

"Hasn't he? Ellen—" Wayne caught himself up short. Then he shrugged. "Let's go look."

Ellen hurried around the corner of the house and began painstakingly looking for the logical spot where the killer would have stood. Wayne stayed near her, alternately squinting at the window and studying the ground, working his way through the brush and trees with slow, methodical care.

He was, Ellen knew, an expert at trailing; and she was no slouch herself. Together they went over every inch of ground from which a shot could have been fired into that window. They found absolutely nothing.

At the end of an hour, Ellen lifted a weary arm to brush the hair off her forehead, looking back over the ground they had covered. "We've missed it somewhere."

Wayne leaned back against the trunk of a gnarled old cottonwood and reached for tobacco, not answering her.

"Wayne," she said, impulsively moving nearer, "it's got to be here somewhere. Mike said the killer couldn't have been far away."

"I reckon," Wayne said slowly, "he was right about that."

"What do you mean?"

Wayne hesitated, his dark eyes probing into her. Finally he shook his head. "You like the guy, Ellen. I hurt you awhile ago when I started to say what I thought."

"Then you think—he did it?"

"Did Larson check his gun to see if it had been fired?"

"Yes," Ellen admitted, adding hastily, "Mike shot at a rattlesnake on the way in."

Again Wayne gave her that queer, searching glance. Then he smiled, shaking his head ruefully. "Must be wonderful to have a girl feel that way about you."

ELLEN didn't pay any attention to that. "Just why," she demanded, "would Mike have wanted the sheriff to come out here and cut for sign if he knew there wasn't any?"

"A man who's cutting for tracks," Wayne said evenly, "is generally too busy to pay much attention to anything else."

"You think Mike was looking for a chance to get away?"

"That's the only way I can figure it, Ellen. When I showed up, he knew he wouldn't have a chance against two of us, so he quit."

For a moment Ellen tried to glare her defiance of that idea, but she couldn't hold her own under the steady scrutiny of Wayne's eyes.

"He couldn't explain, Ellen," Wayne said gently. "I don't know what he was starting to tell you when I broke into it, but he sure backed off in a hurry when I got there." He shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe I shouldn't have said what I did in there, Ellen. It just popped out. But I did offer him five hundred bucks for the stud and he—"

"I know the horse," she interrupted shortly.

How well she knew him! She had been riding with Mike two months before when they'd spotted that horse. By a fluke of luck, the stallion had been sick—too sick to run, having evidently been bitten by a rat-

tlesnake; but even then he had been beautiful.

To this day Ellen could see the boyish eagerness that had come into Mike's eyes when the horse was caught.

"He's ours, Ellen!" he had exulted. "I'll break him, ride him into town. Then we'll show 'em!"

Wayne's quiet voice broke into her thoughts. "Blake said the other day he was going to tell you to stay away from Gordon. Maybe the old man made a threat or something that caused Mike to shoot him. I don't know, Ellen, but I wish I'd kept my damn mouth shut."

It was too much for Ellen. The events of the past two hours finally caught up with her; and before she knew what was coming, tears were splashing off the end of her nose. She offered no resistance this time as Wayne folded his arms around her, but buried her face in his shirt and let herself go.

"My gosh," he breathed hoarsely. "I hate to see you feel this way. If there was anything in the world I could do to help you, Ellen, I would."

Never had Ellen felt so utterly alone, not even when her dad had died. Then she had been a little girl, and the world had been full of women and kindly old men who hovered over her. Now there was only one person in the world who counted, and he was in jail.

Ellen still couldn't believe that Mike Gordon was guilty. He had started to explain about that hard-ridden horse. He had started toward the window, evidently to look for the killer's tracks. No, there was something radically wrong here; but thinking right now was an effort.

Without really wanting to, Ellen gripped Wayne tighter, clinging to him with a desperation that caused his arms to tighten around her. For once she was grateful for his protective embrace. . . .

His presence continued to be comforting throughout the following morning. He stuck with her like a burr during the coroner's inquest—which was a mere formality—and during the funeral, saying very little but seeming always to be between Ellen and people who might want to express their opinions on painful subjects. Afterward he took her back to the hotel, where she had spent a dreary, sleepless night.

At the door of her room he paused, hat in hand.

"Larson wants me to ride out with him a little," he said awkwardly, "but I'll be back this evening. I'll drive you out to the ranch if you're ready to go."

"Thanks, Wayne."

Ellen turned her attention to straightening the collar of her dark, tight-bodiced dress, carefully avoiding his glance. She hoped guiltily that he would not note the quickening of her pulse at the knowledge that he and the sheriff were both leaving town. Ellen O'Brien had a little private business to attend to before she returned to the ranch.

Then she realized that Wayne was purposely hesitating, and she had to look up. She saw instantly what was coming.

"Ellen," he said slowly, "I don't want to crowd you. Maybe this isn't the time to talk about it, but I want you to know."

"Mr. Blake told me," she interrupted hastily. She didn't want to talk about marriage, and she didn't want to collect any stray kisses.

"There are no strings on my ranch. It's a good little place and someday it'll be better. I could—make you a good home."

"Thanks, Wayne, but—" She shook her head.

"I've been in love with you for a long time," he went on simply, "and I've been hoping—" He broke off, studying her closely and evidently realizing that he was bumping into a stone wall. He shook his head and grinned painfully. "Hell," he murmured. "Well, at least I can keep on doin' things for you. Pete, that cowboy of mine, and I will look after your stock until you

make up your mind what you want to do."

"I'll appreciate that." Ellen wanted to end this conversation right there, but her conscience told her she was being ungrateful. Impulsively she put a hand on his arm. "Wayne, you're sweet."

She felt his arm grow rigid under her touch, but she was not prepared for the sudden storm that engulfed her. Before she could move, Wayne's arms flashed around her and his lips came down on hers in a driving, demanding kiss.

She grabbed him instinctively as her sight blurred. Then she could only hang on for dear life as his lips shifted to her cheek, her hair, then claimed her mouth again before she could get her breath. When he finally stopped kissing her, Ellen had to keep right on clinging to him for several minutes before the world settled back to normal.

"I've been wanting to do that for a long time," he said fervently. "My gosh, Ellen—"

He finished with a hard squeeze that jarred her awake; and abruptly she shoved away from him, her face flaming. He let her go, a look of astonishment blotting out the intent light in his eyes. Then he laughed as he flipped his hat onto his head.

"For a fella that wasn't going to crowd you," he said ruefully, "I'm doin' all right."

Before she could answer, he turned toward the stairway and in three long bounds had reached the lobby. Ellen closed the door, stumbled to a chair and fell into it, staring right straight ahead of her at nothing at all.

CHAPTER THREE

One Defiant Cowgirl

A FEW minutes later, when she stood by the window watching Wayne and Sheriff Larson ride out of town, Ellen had her ideas under control again, although her blood pressure had gone up at least six notches. Darn a man, she thought heatedly, who would take advantage of a girl's gratitude and loneliness in order to swarm all over her.

She was Mike Gordon's girl, and Mike Gordon's girl she was going to remain until Mike Gordon himself put a stop to it.

Wayne and Larson were no sooner out of sight than Ellen was presenting herself at the sheriff's office, smiling sweetly at the shriveled, tobacco-chewing jailer.

"I'd like to see Mr. Gordon," she announced, quite as if she didn't realize that every one in town would think her brazenly out of line.

"What for?" the jailer wanted to know.

"Business. I—Mr. Blake had some deals with him that will have to be cleared up." Ellen didn't consider it necessary to mention that the main deal concerned a marriage contract.

"Well—" The jailer shut one eye while he let the other travel up and down her trim figure in a more careful inspection than was necessary. Ellen flushed but she managed to smile again, and the little man's Adam's apple bobbed noticeably. "Larson said not to let anybody in, but I never could say no to a pretty girl. If you won't squeal on me, miss . . ."

Ellen was already on her way, rounding the desk and heading for the door leading to the small cell block in the rear. She found Mike leaning against the window of his cell, staring disconsolately at the street. He whirled away when he saw her and reached the bars before she did.

"Ellen!" he burst out with a grin. "I didn't think—"

Ellen shushed him with a quick hand over his mouth and jerked her head toward the office. "On business, Mr. Gordon," she said loudly, then stood on tiptoe to kiss him, not even minding the cold pressure of the bars against her cheeks.

Mike managed to get an arm around her waist, and Ellen thought for a minute he was going to try to pull her into the cell.

His kiss was hard and hungry, telling her all she needed to know about the miserable hours he had spent here.

"Gosh, I've been wanting to talk to you," he said fervently. "I was afraid you wouldn't come, after the way you looked at me yesterday."

"Mike, you upset me so when you said you couldn't explain. I was sure you could—"

"Not after Lowry got there. I was going to tell Blake but never got the chance."

"Tell him what, Mike?" she asked anxiously. "Where had you been on that black horse?"

"Out to the ice caves. I had just got back a little while before Lowry came out there."

"The ice caves?" Ellen echoed. "What for?"

"Listen, Ellen." He squeezed her hands so hard they hurt. "Every water hole in the country is dry, and the river's drying up fast. It only runs about two miles below my place now, and in another couple of weeks it will be so close the horses will be afraid to come in. That means they'll have to go to the ice caves for water."

Ellen's mind took off like a spooky bronc. She had visited the caves only once, since they were far out on the barren, uninviting sagebrush plain; but she recalled vividly the deep, jagged hole in the earth that opened into the mysterious underground caverns.

"There's only one trail down into those caves," Mike went on swiftly, "and it can be blocked off easy. I finished making the gate day before yesterday and hid it out there in the brush."

"Oh, Mike," Ellen breathed, in growing excitement, "you could trap enough horses to stock every ranch in this valley."

"More than I could handle," he agreed. "It's the chance I've been waiting for, Ellen, but I didn't dare tell about it in front of Lowry or anybody else. I'd just be giving them a chance to cash in on all the workin' and waitin' I've done for the last two years."

"Don't tell anybody," Ellen said. "Those horses are yours."

"I told the sheriff on the way in, but I might as well have saved my breath. He didn't believe me, any more than he believed my story of the shooting."

Ellen's heart dropped like a rock. "Mike," she said, her voice suddenly tight, "I looked for tracks out there."

Mike's eyes searched her face. "You didn't find anything, huh?"

Ellen could only shake her head.

"I should have known," Mike said bitterly. "Anyone clever enough to frame me like that would be clever enough to kill his tracks. Somebody wants to get me out of the way, and it kinda looks like he's going to get the job done."

"But who, Mike? Who'd do a thing like that?"

MIKE hesitated, studying her closely. "Might be somebody who already knows about my horse trap," he said slowly, "or it might be somebody that wants—the same thing I want."

"What?" Ellen caught her breath as she realized that Mike was referring to her. That could mean only one man. "Oh, no, Mike," she said quickly. "Wayne wouldn't do a thing like that. Why, he said yesterday he wished he'd kept his mouth shut about the stallion and everything. He's been awfully good to me."

"I'll bet he has!"

Ellen had never before seen a glint of naked jealousy in Mike's eyes, and it chilled her and warmed her all at the same time.

"There must be somebody else, Mike."

"Maybe there is." Mike dropped his head wearily. "Guess I'd have saved myself a lot of trouble if I'd sold him that stud, but I'd planned on giving him to you. He's breakin' out gentle, and I thought—Hell!" he broke off. "Looks like all I'll ever give

you now is a chance to go to my funeral."

"Mike, don't say that! They wouldn't—wouldn't—"

"The hell they wouldn't. The coroner's jury named me as the killer, and it was cold-blooded murder. I wish now I'd made a break for it yesterday. Maybe I could have found something to clear myself. As it is, I'm stuck. They'll hang me so damned high—"

"Mike, don't!" Ellen shook her head violently. Seeing Mike behind bars was bad enough; hearing him admit defeat was unbearable. "Maybe if we can prove you were telling the truth about not robbing the stage, they'll believe you about this other."

"That's likely," he snorted. "It's a pretty good bet that the same man is behind all of it, which means that he won't rob the stage again now that I'm in jail. He may even plant some phony evidence on the ranch, now that I'm gone."

"No," Ellen said flatly. "I'll go out there, Mike, right now. I won't let him!"

At her fierce declaration, Mike looked up, the rock-hard expression on his face breaking into a faint grin.

"You better keep out of this, young lady. That hombre is playin' for keeps, whoever he is."

"But, Mike—"

"I wish you would ride out there, though, long enough to turn that stallion out of the corral. His stomach is probably commencin' to think his throat's been cut."

"I'll ride out there," Ellen assured him, her head bobbing. "And if anybody tries to plant anything on that ranch—"

She lost track of her idea as Mike's arm slid around her waist. Once more Ellen went up on tiptoe, trying to get her arms around his neck but getting them mostly around a couple of iron bars. But the hard pressure of his lips cut through her dreadful thoughts and, as usual when he was kissing her, there was nothing in the world except a man named Mike Gordon.

Mike took his time with that kiss, lingering over it as if it were the last one he expected to get. Then he grinned ruefully at her.

"Hell of a way to kiss your gal, isn't it?" he said. "But I can stand anything as long as you don't quit me."

"I'm not going to quit you," Ellen said stoutly. "We'll do something, Mike. I don't know what, but something!"

Two hours later, as Ellen put her horse into the dwindling river just above Mike's ranch, she was still wondering what that something would be. She had driven the buggy out of town, stopping at her own ranch only long enough to switch to levis and boots and to saddle a horse.

As she emerged from the willows, she looked with poignant, possessive pride at the evidence of Mike's two years of hard work. The spread looked neat and inviting, the rock house squatting under a towering cottonwood and the new wire fence around the meadow glistening under the August sun.

As Ellen rounded the house, she pulled up short, startled at the sight of two saddled horses near the kitchen door. She recognized the horses Wayne and Larson had ridden out of town, but this did not reassure her. With her heart hammering painfully, she rode on to the door and dismounted as the sheriff appeared in the doorway.

Ellen was aware that Wayne was stepping out behind the sheriff, his face hard; but she couldn't get her eyes off the object in Larson's hand. It was a dark metal box, scratched and dented.

"What—" She had to swallow before she could loosen her throat enough to voice the question. "What's that?"

"The express box that last shipment of gold was in," Larson said gruffly. "Evidently Gordon didn't have time to dispose of the box, but he shore hid that gold in a hurry."

Ellen's heart did a flip flop. She was too late! She flashed a distressed glance at Wayne, whose face, she noted, was as grave

and grim-looking as she had ever seen it.

"Wait," she said hurriedly to Larson. "Mike didn't put that box in there. He told me he was afraid this might happen, that somebody might try to plant some evidence on the ranch."

Wayne looked up sharply. "When did you see him?"

"Right after you left town," Ellen retorted. "I went down to see him, to find out why he wouldn't explain yesterday. He couldn't have committed that robbery, Mr. Larson. He told you where he'd been!"

"Yeah." The old sheriff glanced at the box in his hand, then looked up at her, his squinted gaze a mixture of exasperation and pity. "I got to hand it to that boy. First fella I ever met who can spit out the alibis faster than a man can accuse him of anything."

"It wasn't an alibi!" Ellen cried. "Don't you see? He just figured out what was going to happen. He says somebody's trying to get rid of him—"

"Who?" Wayne cut in.

"He—I—"

Ellen stopped, taking time out for long searching inspection of Wayne Lowry. His face was grim, but his eyes were steady. He lifted one hand in an appealing gesture. "If he's got any ideas about something we ought to look into, Ellen, you'd better tell us. This is getting worse by the minute."

Ellen shook her head, sure again that it could not be Wayne Lowry. "He didn't say who, Wayne, but it's a cinch somebody's trying to frame him."

WAYNE exchanged glances with the sheriff, and there was something about that look that knocked Ellen's temper clear off the track. She whirled toward the lawman.

"You dim-witted old block-head!" she blazed. "Mike told you where he'd been, which means that he couldn't have robbed that stage. He had just got back here when Wayne showed up."

"Yeah," Larson agreed. "That's why he didn't get this box put away. You must have scared the stuffin' out of him when you showed up unexpected thataway."

Ellen's stomach turned completely upside down at the realization that she had unwittingly provided them with new evidence. "Listen," she burst out. "Mr. Larson—"

"You listen," he said suddenly, turning to jab a rigid forefinger almost into her face. "I may be a dim-witted old block-head, but at least I'm not a scatterbrained ninny. Hellsfire and damnation, girl! I've always heard that love was blind, but nobody ever told me it was deaf and dumb, too. You can see the evidence as well as I can. What the hell do you expect me to do with it—set on it till it hatches?"

"But, Mr. Larson—"

"Don't Mr. Larson me!" he exploded, throwing up his hands. "Dammit all! I'm just the sheriff, and my name ain't Cupid. A body would think it was my fault you went and fell in love with a skunk!"

Ellen still held her head up defiantly, but she couldn't control the tears that spilled suddenly down over her cheeks. She didn't move as Wayne's arm closed around her shoulders.

"Back up, Larson," he bit out in a hard voice. "She can't help how she feels, and there's no point in rubbing it in."

Ellen was only dimly aware that the sheriff climbed onto his horse and spurred out of the ranch yard as if he had just received word of a riot on main street. Most of her attention was taken up with the fact that she once more had her face buried in Wayne Lowry's shirt front, and the shirt was getting wet.

"I still don't believe it," she sobbed out, unconsciously digging holes in Wayne's ribs with her fingers. "I just know Mike didn't do it."

"Take it easy, Ellen," said Wayne gently. "No use fightin' the bit this way, honey.

Maybe it'll still all work out all right."

But he didn't sound like he had much faith in the idea, and Ellen's spirits sank completely out of sight. She wanted to think, to figure out what she should do next; but all she could think was that she had let Mike down.

She accepted Wayne's help in getting the spirited stallion out of the corral and into a small pasture bordering the river, and she was infinitely grateful for the man's considerate silence.

Try as she would, she could not make Wayne Lowry look or act like a stage robber and murderer. Besides, she knew with certainty that he had had no opportunity to ride back to this ranch to plant anything since the trouble all started yesterday. He had spent the night in town—in a room right across from hers at the hotel—and he had spent all his waking moments with her, up until the time he had ridden out of town with the sheriff.

He wanted the same thing Mike wanted—of that there was no doubt—but he seemed perfectly willing to bide his time. Waiting to pick up the pieces, Ellen thought, with a bitterness that was directed at circumstances rather than at Wayne.

If it wasn't Wayne, then who, she wondered desperately? And she voiced that query to Wayne as soon as they were mounted and started back up the river. He merely shook his head.

"Wayne, you've got to help me," she pleaded, "and help Mike. Don't you see? Somebody's framing him!"

"No," he said. "I don't see. I'll help you, yes, any way I can, any time. I guess you know by now that I'm—interested in your happiness. But don't ask me to help the coyote that's trying to make you miserable."

"Make me miserable?" she gasped.

"That's what I said. He's got you so upset right now you don't know whether you're ridin' a horse or a line-backed cow. He's as guilty as hell, Ellen, and everybody knows it but you. Think, girl! He admitted to you that he'd just got into camp when I rode up. Then I guess he remembered that box, so he got you all prepared not to believe it when you saw it. He doesn't give a damn what happens to you. He doesn't give a damn whether your heart gets broken or not, as long as he can keep you danglin'—"

"Quit it!" Ellen burst out, standing in the stirrups and lifting her rommel threateningly. "I won't listen to that kind of talk. I don't believe it, and you can't make me believe it. You're just—just—Oh, shut up and go home!"

With that, she brought the rommel down on her horse's rump and jumped him into a stampeding run toward her ranch, but she had to leave it up to the horse to pick the trail. Ellen was too busy with a crying jag to watch where she was going.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead or Alive!

LATE evening found Ellen jogging back into town, minus the supper she hadn't been able to force down. As she had told Wayne, she still couldn't believe that Mike Gordon was the man he was being painted; but every time she tried to name another man to fit the picture, she ran smack into a blank wall.

She rounded the livery stable at the edge of town and swung into the darkened main street, only to jump her sorrel out of the way as half a dozen riders bore down on her, their horses at a dead run. They swept past her with hardly a glance; and Ellen sat rigid in the saddle, listening to the thunder of hoofs die out on the road to the river.

What, she thought distractedly, had happened now? Suddenly breathless and unaccountably frightened, she kicked her sorrel into a lope toward the sheriff's office.

A number of men were clustered around the front of the building. Ellen rode her horse right into the middle of them, ignoring their startled curses as she jumped from the saddle and ran for the door. She saw Larson pulling a rifle off a wall rack; but she ignored him, too, darting around the desk and heading for the door to the cell block.

She didn't even see the town blacksmith until he grabbed her arms and jerked her to a stop. "You don't want to go in there, ma'am. It ain't pretty."

"What—ain't pretty?"

"Old Spike. Gordon killed him in makin' his getaway."

Ellen sagged in the man's grasp, staring at his bearded face in stunned incredulity. Old Spike, the tobacco-chewing jailer who had let her in to see Mike that morning! Then Ellen's staggering brain fell over the rest of the man's statement.

"Getaway?" she gasped. "Is Mike gone?"

"He's gone, damn him! Spike must have got too close to that cell door while Larson was out to supper. Gordon grabbed him, got the keys and Spike's gun, and high-tailed."

Ellen turned back into the room, grabbing at the desk for support. Through a haze, she saw Pete, the burly cowboy who worked for Wayne Lowry, crowd into the office to make a report to Larson.

"Some of the boys have headed for his ranch in case he goes back there after the gold. Some of 'em are tryin' to pick up his track, although they won't have no luck as dark as it is."

"Keep 'em scattered," Larson said grimly.

"Don't worry," the cowboy retorted. "The fellers around town are gettin' up a reward. Where you headin'?"

"To meet the stage. It should be awful handy to town right now, and it's carrying a big shipment tonight."

"Gordon know about it?"

"If he doesn't, he's deaf. We were talking about it awhile ago."

Ellen lifted one hand to her spinning head, trying to think but getting exactly nowhere. She heard a shout go up outside, but it didn't mean anything to her until she heard the pound of running horses, the accompanying rattle of the stagecoach. Every man in the room jumped for the door and Ellen followed, merely because she didn't know what else to do.

She reached the doorway in time to see the horses being dragged to a halt by men on foot, and she wondered dazedly what was the matter with the driver. Her first glance at the coach registered nothing except the vehicle itself. Then she saw a man's leg dangling over the edge of the boot.

Ellen closed both hands around the door casing and fell against it, staring at that leg until it was blotted from sight by men clambering to the top of the stage. She knew, even before they lifted Barney down, that he was dead; and she knew the gold shipment was gone. But she didn't realize how quiet it had been until the sheriff's voice cut into the silence like the rasp of a saw.

"This settles it. I want every man who can scare up a horse and a gun. Trailing Gordon won't work 'cause he knows the badlands better than we do and he's smart, but we'll scatter out and cover this country till a damn grasshopper won't have a chance to spit. And we'll make that reward dead or alive!"

Those words splashed over Ellen like a bucket of ice water. She was aware that the men stampeded, yelling and cursing; but she kept her horrified gaze on Larson, who was coming back to the office with a heavy, determined stride. He stepped through the doorway past her, then stopped, seeming to notice her for the first time.

"Mr. Larson," she breathed, "you're going to kill him!"

The sheriff's voice was as hard as a rock. "I hope to."

"But you can't. Not without giving him a chance to explain!"

"Explain!" Larson echoed incredulously. "Explain what? That he killed Spike just so he could walk out and get a little fresh air? That he killed Barney because he was fresh out of tobacco money? Hellsfire, woman!"

"But maybe there's some mistake. It isn't like Mike to do things like that."

"There's no mistake. Innocent men don't break jail. Listen, Ellen." The old sheriff's face broke into a frown of distress as he folded his hands over her shoulders. "I'm sorry I blew up out there this afternoon. I know you can't help how you feel, and I was wishing for your sake that there was something I could do. Now I haven't any choice. Don't you see, honey? The man's gone plumb bad, and we've got to get him."

"But can't you just arrest him?" she pleaded. "If you send all those men after him—"

"You think he'll come back to jail after killing a man to get out of it?" Larson shook his head emphatically. "He knows it's all up with him if he's caught now. The fact that he killed Barney this time proves that. My gosh, Ellen, you surely don't still believe he's innocent?"

Ellen didn't try to answer. She didn't know what to believe; but she did know that she couldn't stand the thought of Mike's being out in the night alone, with every man in the country hunting for him.

The sheriff sighed wearily, shaking his head as he turned toward his desk. "I pass, Ellen. That stubborn little heart of yours wouldn't believe the truth if it fell over it, but you might as well brace yourself, honey. Mike Gordon's a dead man, any way you look at it."

Ellen shuddered. Mike had said it—"a chance to go to my funeral." Memory of that last kiss and the way he had lingered over it tore Ellen's heart into little pieces.

"Where's Wayne?" Larson asked suddenly.

"I don't know." Ellen couldn't care less. "He went home, I guess."

"If you see him, tell him I need him, will you? And you better stay in town again tonight, Ellen. No telling where Gordon will go, but it's not going to be any night for a girl to be running around alone."

Ellen's heart gave one good jump and then went into a war dance. Without even answering the sheriff, she turned out the door and walked to her horse, trying to appear casual when she was bursting to get out of there. She swung into her saddle and turned her horse back up the street, holding him to a walk until she had once more rounded the corner by the livery stable. Then she leaned over the sorrel's neck and proceeded to spur the hide off him.

The sheriff might not know where Gordon would go but Ellen did, at least where he'd try to go. Her ranch. He wouldn't leave the country without trying to see her, and Ellen wanted desperately to see him—before any of that kill-hungry mob did. Mike would undoubtedly know the sheriff was after him, but he couldn't know about the reward that would prompt any man in the country to shoot him on sight.

Ellen's stubborn little heart was still for Mike, and she still wasn't about to quit him. Maybe he had gone plumb bad, but his funeral was something she couldn't bear to think about.

THE moon was up, full and cheering, by the time Ellen turned off the main road onto the road leading to her ranch, half a mile away. Suddenly remembering the six men who had pounded out of town just as she entered, she pulled the sorrel out of his hard run, turned him out of the road and circled to come in behind the spread at an easy, quiet jog. This was no time to advertise either her whereabouts or her intentions.

Her instinctive caution paid off. As she

neared the edge of the brush and trees behind the corrals, she heard the unmistakable sound of a saddled horse shaking himself somewhere ahead of her. Ellen was off instantly, grabbing her horse's nose, her blood racing wildly. Maybe Mike was already here—or maybe someone else had the same idea she'd had about where Mike Gordon would go first.

Moving as soundlessly as possible and being very careful not to run into any dry snags, Ellen led the sorrel back far enough to kill his interest in that other horse, and tied him securely. She removed her spurs and hung them over the saddle horn. Then she hurried toward the spot where she'd heard that horse, her heart lodged so squarely in the center of her throat that she couldn't breathe worth a whoop.

If it was Mike, she told herself excitedly, she would hide him until the first fury of the chase had died down, then help him get away. Maybe even go with him . . . .

She heard the horse again, stamping restlessly, and she dropped to her hands and knees, injuning up on the spot with a stealth that would have done credit to Geronimo. She saw the horse, saddled but riderless, nibbling at the brush; but she couldn't recognize the animal. Cautiously, she wormed closer, lifted her head for a better look—and stifled a gasp.

There was a second horse in that clearing, and he definitely was not riderless. Very definitely not. Mike Gordon sat with his bare head bowed, both hands on the fork of his saddle; and he was shaking his head with an impatience that suggested he was trying to clear it.

Mike had been hurt! Instinctively Ellen started up but dropped back as the brush cracked and a second man stepped into view. Ellen just had time to recognize Wayne Lowry before her brain seemed to quit her completely. What were these two men doing together?

She watched in stunned bewilderment as Wayne stepped closer to Mike.

"Coming out of it, huh?" he asked with satisfaction. "I was beginning to think I'd hit you so hard I wouldn't have the pleasure of shooting you."

That remark hadn't fully registered with Ellen when she saw Wayne lay hold of Mike's wrist and tug sharply. Nothing happened, and Ellen thought at first that Mike was clinging to the saddle horn. Then she saw that his hands were tied to it! His feet were tied, too, under the horse's belly.

"I didn't think I'd have to go this far," Wayne said with mock sympathy, "but that little lady friend of yours takes a lot of convincin'. When she didn't even believe the evidence of that box, I just had to bust you out of jail."

Mike's voice sounded weak. "What box?"

"The one I stuck in your house right after you left yesterday. I been laying for you for a long time, friend Mike, and I had you figured right down to the ground. I knew if I hinted at what folks were thinking, you'd fog it right straight down here to see Blake. So I waited till you pulled out, dropped off that box, then whipped myself down here to help you commit murder. I do appreciate your shooting at that rattlesnake."

Mike swore thickly. "She'll never marry you!"

"I think maybe she will," Wayne replied, showing a smug, taunting grin. "After tonight, even she will have to admit that you're a curly wolf. You killed Spike in making your getaway. Did you know that? Then you held up the stage again and killed Barney. Surprising what a man can do in his sleep, isn't it?"

Wayne laughed, then cocked his head to listen. "I hear a horse coming. If it's the word I'm expecting, your troubles are just about over, Michael."

Ellen was frozen. She couldn't have moved if she had wanted to. All she could do was stare, while her brain struggled to free itself from the shock that had knocked it out of commission.

She saw Pete ride into the clearing and pull up with an air of satisfaction.

"Dead or alive," he announced. "And the girl's in town."

"Just as I figured," Wayne nodded. He looked back at Mike; and even in the uncertain light of the moon, Ellen saw something in his eyes that made her shiver. "See how it's going to work, friend Mike? Pete's an awful smart boy. He figured out that you might try to see Ellen before you left the country, so he loped out here and—" He spread his hands expressively. "Sure enough!"

Mike showed his teeth in helpless fury. "You think she'll have anything to do with you after this?"

"I'm home in bed," Wayne pointed out. "Pete's the boy that nailed you, and I'll fire him for it, first thing in the morning. I'm a considerate cuss, you know."

"Let's get it over with," Pete said gruffly. "Somebody else might figure he'd come out here."

"We'll untie him first, so he can spill out of that saddle natural like without getting any rope burns. Then we'll drop Spike's gun beside him."

With a few swift jerks, they untied the ropes binding Mike's legs. Then, as Pete laid hold of the hand ropes, Wayne stepped back and drew his gun.

The vise that had gripped Ellen suddenly let go.

A scream of protest flew up in her throat but couldn't get past her heart, which seemed to be jammed there. Frantically she jumped to her feet, grabbing at a dead snag that caught at her clothing. The snag broke off in her hands, and she took it with her as she plunged into the clearing.

She had just a glimpse of Pete jerking the rope off Mike's wrist, of Wayne lifting the gun. Then Mike was throwing himself off the horse in a desperate dive at Wayne, and Ellen was bearing down on Pete.

She heard the crash of the gun, but it only lent strength to her arm as she brought the club down on Pete's head. Pete staggered into the horse and Ellen hit him again, boring in mercilessly. That second blow was a humdinger. As the horse shied out of the way, Pete sagged to the ground like an empty grain sack.

Ellen didn't even take time to catch her breath. She dodged the snorting, terrified horse, fully prepared to use that club again on Wayne Lowry; but she didn't need to. She had just a fleeting, blurred glimpse of the two men struggling before the gun crashed again; and the two forms broke apart. One of them—Wayne—folded in the middle and went down head first. The other one whirled toward Ellen with the gun in his hand.

"Mike!" she blurted. "Don't!"

Mike caught himself, his eyes popping wide as he stared first at Ellen, then at the prostrate Pete. He started to straighten up, staggered and sat down with a jarring thud.

"Where'd you come from?" he asked blankly.

"The bushes," Ellen said and dropped to her knees beside him. "Oh, Mike, they'll have to believe us now."

"No," he said joyfully, "they won't have to believe *us*. If you didn't knock all of Pete's brains out, he'll talk to save his own neck."

"I left him a few," said Ellen, but she wasn't interested in Pete. Her attention was all taken up with the light that was starting to shine in Mike's eyes.

"You never quit me, did you?" he murmured huskily.

"No, and what's more—Mike, let's get married before some idiot decides I need another guardian."

"Some idiot's already decided it," Mike said and pulled her up close to prove it.

Which was all right with Ellen since this guardian proved, too, that he was neither cold nor unapproachable—nor temporary!

THE END

THE COWGIRL and THE NESTER

HANK McCONNELL tacked the last cedar shingle in place on the roof of his new cabin, let the hammer slide off to the ground, and then slid off behind it on the seat of his pants. At the eaves he gave a shove with his hands to keep his back from scraping. He hit the dirt below with his knees bent in a fighter's crouch to cushion the jolt.

A horse nickered in surprise as he landed, skittering away a few paces, and Hank was surprised himself. The man sitting the saddle of the big bay fought the reins a moment. When the horse was quieted, he looked down upon the rangy blond man in disgust.

"That's the gol-durndest fool thing I ever saw a man do," the horseman said, rolling his head with emphasis. He had handlebar mustaches that shook with his words, but his leather-brown cheeks were clean-shaven. In a state of anger he was a foreboding sight. His shoulders were as wide as an axe-handle, and his great chest strained manfully against the buttons of his expensive gabardine shirt.

Hank grinned. "Shucks, mister, I didn't know you were here. You rode up quiet-like, I guess, and I've been busy up there."

He rubbed a sleeve along his sun-burned face, and grinned again. "Hot, ain't it?"

The horseman's fat jaws puffed out as he blew air into them impatiently. "Never mind the weather. What I'm here for is to tell you you're squatting on my land. You'll have to leave."

Hank looked stunned. He rubbed his blistered hands along the shanks of his new levis and shook his head. "Why, that's crazy, mister. Who do you think you are?"

The big man's saddle creaked as he swung down to the ground. His voice sounded like the bellow of a bull buffalo as he stood in front of Hank and talked. He slapped his hand against his forehead in exasperation, cuffing the big-brimmed white hat up to show iron-gray hair that matched his sweeping mustache.

"You gol-durn fool nester, you should've found that out before you started filing homestead papers on Bull's Eye graze. I'm Rand Harvick, that's who I am; and when I tell a man he's got to git, gol-durn him, he's got to git!"

Hank McConnell's mouth opened in a big round O, and he had trouble getting it to change into any other shape. He wrapped it around a few words at last and

By Hascal Giles

Hank couldn't slay the dragon for his lady fair—
for the dragon was her fire-breathing cattle-king of a dad!

Harvick roared: "McConnell, you turn my daughter loose this minute!"

stammered, "R-Rand Harvick! Why, you must be Kathy's father."

"Yes, I'm Katherine's father, and by damn I—" He suddenly paused and looked sick. "Thunderation, boy, I hope I'm wrong. Don't tell me you're that beanpole Kathy met while she was back East in school and has been moonin' about ever since. Don't tell me you're that gol-durn tenderfoot who told her you'd come West and—"

"That's me, Mister Harvick," Hank said hopefully. "Hank McConnell." He held out his hand hesitantly.

His doubts were quickly affirmed. Rand Harvick slapped at the hand as he would at a pestering horsefly. Hank's grin faded. He rubbed his numbed wrist gingerly with his other hand.

Rand Harvick yanked his hat brim down close to his squinted blue eyes. "You git off my graze by sundown, boy. I ain't giving up my winter pasture, and I ain't allowing my daughter to have no truck with a gol-durn dirt farmer. I'm coming back up here at dusk, and I'm coming loaded for bear. You'd better be gone."

Hank McConnell was still rubbing his stinging wrist, and his gray eyes looked lighter than usual in his thin young face. He was boiling mad, for more reasons than one; but he knew he ought to keep his mouth shut. Rand Harvick was a big man in these parts. He had pioneered this country, owned more cattle than all the other ranchers in the country put together, and his wealth and influence reached clear to the governor's office. Besides, Hank needed to make friends with him if he were to marry his daughter.

But Hank couldn't keep his mind on the practical side of the tally sheet. He took a step toward Rand Harvick and spread his legs wide apart as he imagined Davy Crockett or Jim Bridger might have done. Then he said quietly, "I'm here legal and proper, Mister Harvick, and not you nor anybody else is going to throw me off."

Rand Harvick's mustache bobbed up and down in ridicule. "I can see you ain't got good sense, boy, but you've got more sense than that. I could have you moved just by telling the sheriff I don't like your company. But since it's you and we've got this business about Kathy to settle, I'll be back to do it personal."

The rancher reached for the saddlehorn and pulled himself up on the bay with remarkable agility. Then he whirled and rode away, sitting his horse like a cavalry captain. He did not bother to look back at Hank as he forded Halfway Creek and disappeared into the cover of cottonwoods beyond.

ATHY HARVICK'S pinto came splashing through the rolling water of Halfway Creek at the usual time. It was her custom to take a ride each day just before sundown. Since Hank's arrival in Bull's Eye, it had been an ideal time for them to meet because it did not arouse the suspicion of Kathy's father.

Not that she meant to keep any secrets from her father, Kathy had explained when she suggested that Hank stay away from the ranch; she was just saving him as a surprise. It would be better, she said, if Hank were already established here—had his cabin built and something to prove he could provide for her—when he met her father.

The time for their rendezvous wasn't so good after all, Hank reflected as he watched Kathy ride toward the cabin. It coincided with the deadline her father had set for him to get out of the country. Kathy's explanation of her secretiveness was not so good, either. That was why he did not jump up so swiftly to run out and meet her in his usual way.

Freshly scrubbed, dressed in his best moleskin pants and broadcloth shirt, Hank

sat on the little bench beside the doorway until Kathy had drawn the pinto to a halt in the shade of the towering post oak tree a few feet away. Then he stood up and walked toward her, much as a man might stalk a mountain lion.

Kathy's even white teeth shone against the creamy tan of her face as she smiled at him. Her jet black hair was pulled back close to her head and tied with a blue satin ribbon which matched the sheen of her eyes. The faint fragrance of her perfume mingled pleasantly with the scent of sage and cedar about her.

As Hank stopped beside the horse and drank in the girl's beauty, he almost smiled back at her, but he caught himself in time. She held out her arms, expecting to be lifted gently down, but instead Hank fairly dragged her from the saddle. He stood her on the ground in front of him, still holding her shoulders and fighting the urge to shake her.

"Why, Hank!" Kathy breathed happily, ignoring his rough greeting. She peeked around his shoulder at the neat cabin. "It's finished! The roof is on. It looks wonderful!"

Hank ground his teeth together and held out his torn and callused hands. "Well, it ought to look wonderful. I've got blisters where nobody ever had blisters before. I've been knocked down by half the trees I cut to build it, and I've been bitten twice and kicked twice by that fool horse you told me to get from the livery to drag the logs down here. And I picked this place because you said it was the best site in the county to homestead. You even went with me to file the papers. And now—"

"Well," Kathy said pertly, "what are you complaining about? There's a beautiful creek circling around the place, and acres of good gra—wheat land in the valley behind us."

Hank shook her then. It was a gentle shake, but it was enough to bring a fiery glint into her blue eyes.

"Your father was here, Kathy," Hank said, and his voice was louder and more angry than he had meant it to be.

"Oh," Kathy said weakly.

"Oh," Hank mimicked. "He only waited until I'd bought my plows, bought my seed and built my cabin. Then he told me this was his land. Why did he wait a month? And you, Kathy. You knew this was Harvick graze when you told me to homestead here."

Kathy laughed, hugging herself under shivers of anticipation. "Father just found out about it yesterday, Hank," she chuckled, "and you should have heard him raving about the house. One of our riders saw you working down here while he was checking the winter range. But I didn't think Father would act so soon."

Hank sighed helplessly and walked back to the bench beside the doorway. Kathy followed him, a pouting expression on her red lips.

"It won't be so funny," Hank said ruefully, "when he shows up here in a few minutes and finds me still here. That old walrus is plenty tough. I've heard the fellows in town talk about Rand Harvick, and they say he used to—"

"Bosh," Kathy said lightly. "He's not an old walrus at all; he just snorts around like one. This isn't his range, and he knows it. He knew somebody would file on it sooner or later. He's just trying to live up to the name he had when he was a young, rough-tough buckaroo. Seeing your farming tools and seed bags over there in the shed probably got his temper up. He says this range will blow away in a drought if it's ever plowed up. I told you we should get some stockers and start us a little cattle spread here, Hank."

"But I don't have the money to buy stockers, Kathy. Cattle cost big money. I can get started a lot cheaper with wheat, and it'll earn us just as good a living. But it doesn't make any difference anyway now, unless I can figure out some way to reason

with your father. He's ordered me off."

Kathy tossed her head confidently. "He's bluffing, Hank. Father isn't going to give me up easily, you know. He's looked after me ever since Mother died, coddled me and spoiled me, and he wants to keep me with him as long as he can."

She tugged him to his feet, smiling up at him provocatively. "Can you blame him so much for that, Hank?"

Hank looked into her teasing eyes, and let his glance run over the shimmering swell of her green silk riding blouse. The rough levis she wore for riding did nothing to detract from her small, lithe figure. All he could do was smile and shake his head.

"No," Hank said softly. He pulled her close to him and kissed her.

The splash of a running horse cutting through Halfway Creek broke them apart. Hank turned quickly. Rand Harvick's handsome bay was coming toward them full tilt. The rancher was riding bent in the saddle with a shaking fist stretched out in front of him. The bay skidded to a halt almost in the cabin doorway, and a shower of dust blossomed up around Hank and Kathy.

AND HARVICK hit the ground with an angry roar. "Gol-durn it, I might'a known something was going on behind my back. McConnell, you turn my daughter loose this minute or I'll tear your arms off and beat the daylights out of you with them!"

Hank felt the blood rise in his face. "Kathy's old enough to make up her own mind about that, Mister Harvick. I don't like to be ordered around by people."

Rand Harvick cuffed his forehead so hard his hat fell off, but he did not turn to retrieve it. Instead, he ran his hand through his bristly hair and shoved up the sleeves of his shirt. "You're already past the deadline, boy, and I see I can't talk sense with you. So, I reckon I'll have to try to beat some sense into your head."

Swallowing hard, Hank stepped away from Kathy and gestured placatingly toward her father. "Now, I don't want to make trouble, Mister Harvick."

"You've already got trouble," Rand Harvick said. He came toward Hank in a low crouch, his massive arms showing knotted muscles and his lips split in an eager grin beneath his mustache.

Suddenly Rand Harvick's right fist shot out and caught Hank squarely on the chin. Hank sat down hard in the dirt, feeling like he'd been struck by lightning. His eyes were glassy and his vision was full of spots and flashes. Rand Harvick dived at him, and Hank recovered his senses just in time to roll back on his shoulders and catch the man on upraised feet. He pumped his legs, and Rand Harvick sailed into space, landing with a thudding grunt.

Hank got to his feet. Rand Harvick had come here for a fight. Nothing else would satisfy him, and Hank might as well oblige him.

Harvick came at Hank again, and Hank watched him almost regretfully. The rancher aimed his clubby fist again, but this time Hank sidestepped, blocking the punch with his left forearm. Then, with the man off balance, Hank smacked his own right to Rand Harvick's jaw. The rancher went down. He got up again, looking warily at Hank, and swung a roundhouse blow. Hank repeated the previous procedure. Rand Harvick found himself on the ground, and he sat there a moment shaking his head in disbelief.

"You're lucky, boy," he said, getting up. "Not tough, just lucky."

He dived at Hank's leg, but the strategy failed. While the man was still in mid-air, Hank slapped him on the back of the neck, backing away so that he did not catch the weight of Harvick's body as he fell. Rand Harvick struggled to his feet four more times; Hank knocked him down four more times. Then Kathy intervened.

She ran out from the cabin doorway, where, up to now, she had been yelling excitedly, enjoying the fight. She helped Rand Harvick to his feet.

"That's enough, Father," she said. "You're whipped, so don't get yourself all bruised up any more."

Rand Harvick patted his daughter's shoulder and grinned sheepishly. Then he looked at Hank and nodded silent assent, but there was no smile for him.

"What did you do back East, boy?"

It was Hank's turn to look sheepish. "Before I met Kathy I was trying to be a prize fighter. I hoped I'd get a chance to fight John L. Sullivan some day."

Some of the old vigor returned to Rand Harvick's voice as he glowered at his daughter. "Gol-durn it, Kathy, you've got a streak of the devil in you sometimes! You knew this blamed tenderfoot was a professional brawler and you stood by and watched me get myself into a fight with him."

"With your eyes wide open, father," Kathy said evenly.

Rand Harvick snorted and stamped around in the yard to work his anger off. He motioned for Hank to follow him, and walked around to the rear of the cabin.

"Now look here, McConnell," Rand Harvick said. "I know you've put in a lot of work here, and that you've got a lot of high hopes. I'll make a deal with you. Stay away from my daughter and I'll stay away from you. You can have this homestead with my blessing."

Hank sighed and shook his head. "Suppose I offered you ten thousand dollars for your permission to marry Kathy. What would you say, Mr. Harvick?"

"Why you gol-durn whipper-snapper! Do you think my daughter's for sale?"

Hank grinned. "Well, there you are, sir. I'm not going to sell her, either."

A deep red flush crept over Rand Harvick's broad face. He'd lost another round. He was not accustomed to being outfought or outsmarted, and his fury was almost beyond control. He tramped back to the front of the cabin and swung into his saddle without pausing. He said hoarsely:

"I'm giving you and Kathy an hour to say good-by. If Kathy ain't home by that time, I'm coming back and it's my last trip, McConnell. And the next time I'll be wearing my gun. I'll find out if you're a professional with a .45, too."

Come along and meet the . . .

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Hank looked sadly at Kathy after he had gone. He shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. "You'd better run along, Kathy. Looks like we've caused enough trouble for one day."

She reached for his hand.

"Do you love me very much, Hank?" she asked softly.

As answer, Hank took her in his arms and kissed her fiercely. "Since the day I met you, Kathy, I've been living for the day this cabin would be built."

"Then I've got something to say about this," Kathy said firmly. "Father thinks he'll be disgraced if I marry a nester, but if that's all we can afford and you're too proud to accept help from him, he'll just have to live it down. Saddle your horse. We're going into town for the preacher. We're getting married tonight."

Hank grinned. "Kathy, you're wonderful!"

He started at a run toward the shed, but he came back with a troubled frown on his face. "We can do such a thing only one way, Kathy. We'll have to go by the ranch and tell your father."

Kathy started to protest, but Hank went on: "I wouldn't bargain for you, and I won't steal you, Kathy. We can tell him our minds are made up, and if he still wants a showdown there'll just have to be one."

HANK McCONNELL stood uneasily in the center of the long, richly furnished parlor of the Harvick ranch house and met the steady gaze of Rand Harvick with unwavering eyes. But his breath was uneven in his chest, and he talked hurriedly, watching for the first signs of the storm which was sure to break.

Hank finished talking and stole a glance at Kathy, who was standing a few feet away with the black-frocked minister she had insisted on bringing here with them. It was the first time Hank had seen Kathy so quiet and tense.

Rand Harvick, bareheaded and smoking a crooked-stem pipe, looked only like a tired old man amid the comforts of his own home. He took the pipe from his mouth after a long pause.

"Now, I figured this might happen," Rand Harvick said quietly, "because Kathy is just as mule-headed as you are, McConnell. About everything except plowing under good grass, that is. So I figured I'd just sit here and wait for you, and do a little thinking for a change instead of so much talking. It just dawned on me a few minutes ago that I'm still holding high card in this deal. So, if you're the man Kathy wants, I reckon you'll have to be good enough for me."

Hank gulped and sat down in the chair nearest him. "You mean—do you mean you—"

Kathy came to his rescue. She ran across the room and put her arms around Rand Harvick's bull-like neck, kissing him fondly. "He means the wedding is going to be right here, darling," she said to Hank.

Rand Harvick stood up, chuckling to himself. "And the dowry's all arranged, too, Kathy."

"The what?" Hank asked in surprise.

"Kathy's dowry. Gol-durn it, boy, you don't expect a girl with Kathy's background to get married without a dowry, do you? No, sir! I've got it all ready. Eighty of the prettiest white-faced cattle in my herd and the finest shorthorn bull that ever muzzled Bull's Eye range."

Hank McConnell was at a loss for words. He found his voice at last and said, "But, Mister Harvick, I can't grow wheat and raise cattle on the same land. The cattle would eat the wheat as fast—"

"I hear tell that'll happen," Rand Harvick said. He threw his head back and laughed heartily at his own triumph, winking at the bewildered minister who still stood by the door with his arms folded. "You ready to get this shindig underway, parson?"

TROOPER, BEWARE!

GLAMOROUS Risa Storm was hardly the governess type. When she turned up at a romance-starved frontier fort as nursemaid to the general's children, every soldier was in mortal danger. For that man-hunting minx was there for one reason—a dangerous campaign of love. . . .

When they emerged from the darkness of the post into the glow of light from General Cullen's house, Risa dropped her hand from Bill Jessup's arm. "Thank you," she said. "It isn't necessary to take me to the door. I feel quite safe now."

"Sure, Miss Storm?"

"Yes. Good night, Captain Jessup."

"Risa." The quick, low word halted her and drove her pulses into a fast, triumphant rhythm. "I think I ought to warn you. You're getting mixed up in something—making a bad mistake. I'll admit almost anything is possible, on the frontier, for a girl like you. But don't forget that 'almost.' That Englishman, Montebrook, isn't part of the frontier. He may seem like your great opportunity because he's rich and has a title. But that's just what will trip you up."

"You're trying to warn me about David Montebrook," Risa said quietly. "But you're not being very clear."

"Then I'll come to the point. Montebrook will never make anything but a highly 'suitable' marriage. He'd probably be the first to admit it. If he married a governess—a former actress—it would mean sheer ruin to a man like him."

Risa stared up at him through the gloom, fighting to hold down her anger. Then she smiled inwardly. If Jessup resented the other man's attentions, it might mean that his armor was starting to crack.

"I don't believe David's like that," she said, her voice sounding confused. "You can't be sure of what you said." She swayed closer, impulsively, and her head tilted, sending the scent of her hair into his nostrils.

"Listen to me!" he snapped. "The only thing for you to do is leave—go back where you belong."

"I can't." A quick, unsteady breath drove through her parted lips. "I can't!"

"Yes, you can." He touched her shoulder gently, encouragingly. "It can be arranged—"

He broke off and caught her into his arms. His kiss was lightning flashing through the night, tearing the darkness from the sky. A flame of captured lightning was on his lips and hers, recklessly joining them. There was no armor encasing him now. Instead . . .

"Risa." Bill Jessup's voice was calling her back, forcing her back to reality. He was no longer kissing her, but holding her lightly. "It's time for you to go in."

She moved away from him, studying him in silence. "Why did you warn me against David Montebrook?" she asked finally. "Was it because you—"

"No," he cut in ruthlessly. "Not because I want you for myself. I meant what I said. Go home. Everybody on this frontier is playing for high stakes. If you get into the game and lose—there won't be anything after that."

Once more his face was a dim, remote shape in the gloom. He was rejecting her, telling her that she didn't belong in his world any more than in Montebrook's.

But he could be wrong. He was very wrong about David Montebrook.

She turned and walked lightly away from him. . . .

Marian O'Hearn tells the complete story of daring Risa and the stubborn captain in "Coquette's Call to Arms"—in the next issue, out March 5th.

THE EDITOR

EVER-LOVING LOBO

LOU MATTHEWS was as nervous as a colt under its first saddling. For the fifteenth time she crossed the kitchen of the Bar M ranch house to scan the trail to town, her boot heels clumping impatiently. The sun had set and darkness was rapidly closing in over the rolling, timber-dotted range land, but her old dad was still nowhere in sight.

With a worried sigh, she returned to the work table to finish icing the chocolate cake she had baked that morning before starting out to ride fence. It seemed a small and futile gesture, that cake, but maybe it would cheer her dad a little.

She was just scraping the last spoonful of icing from the pan when she heard a horse hit the creek below the house at a dead run. For a second she hung poised, her bluish-green eyes popping wide with instant apprehension. Then she dropped everything and flew to the door, jerking it open just as a horse came to a sliding halt outside.

Lou had a flashing glimpse of a rider throwing himself out of the saddle and whirling toward the door. Then she was staring right straight down the business end of a rifle at the same time that she was acutely, breathlessly aware of the man behind it.

He was a stranger, a long rangy proposition with a pair of deep brown eyes that were fastened on her as if she were a ghost left over from last Hallowe'en. She was aware that he was dressed like any working cowboy, with a scarred denim jacket, a belted sixgun, a wide-brimmed hat pulled low on his head, but her gaze seemed riveted on those startled eyes of his.

Then he took a faltering step backward, lowering the rifle, and Lou got her tongue located.

"What—do you want?"

"Miss," he mumbled, his voice slightly thick, "I didn't think you'd be home alone. Excuse me all to hell."

As he started to turn toward his horse, he staggered badly, and then Lou saw the stain of fresh blood spreading rapidly over the left thigh of his levis. Without stopping to think, she jumped out the door and grabbed his arm to steady him.

"You're hurt!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Lou could still feel the penetrating power of those brown eyes, but it was his faint, tired grin that knocked the props out from under her.

"That's why I was looking for a place to bush up," he explained. "I knew your dad was gone—"

"Is somebody chasing you?" Lou interrupted.

"Yes'm." He glanced over her head at his back trail, and his voice turned grim. "And if they catch up with me, I'm gonna be too damned dead to skin. Reckon I better ride on, miss. I don't want to mix you up in a shoot-out."

"Wait!" Lou blurted and then did some waiting herself.

Her head told her plainly that any stranger these days was potentially dangerous,

The kidnapper was a handsome hombre—
and the ransom he asked was . . . one heart.

By Darlene du Bois

He was daring her to shoot him, and Lou tried.

but her heart insisted that any stranger who showed more respect for a lady than he did for his own hide was bound to be worth helping. And Lou knew what it was like to need help.

Right now her dad was out trying to scare up twenty thousand dollars to ransom her little brother Billy, kidnapped two days ago by the ruthless Preston gang, and the money wouldn't come easy. Six months of steady rustling plus three bank robberies had everybody on the ragged edge of bankruptcy.

She looked again at the stranger, searching his face desperately. She didn't know Buck Preston or any of his gang, but men that mean were mound to stand out like longhorns in a bunch of registered Herefords. This man was young, clean looking —and magnetically attractive. Still . .

"Who's chasing you?" she asked anxiously.

"Clay Bryant and three of his men."

"What for?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes," Lou said, "it does."

It mattered a great deal! She saw his eyes playing over her face. "I killed one of his men awhile ago," he said slowly. "It was self-defense, but Bryant and the others took it up. I couldn't lick 'em all."

"Then—" Lou swallowed around a lump of shameful eagerness in her throat, "—then you're not one of Buck Preston's gang?"

"No, ma'am." A twinkle of amusement bounced into his eyes, and that faint grin came again. "But that won't keep me from—"

"Come in the house," Lou interrupted. She flashed a look over her shoulder, saw the rapidly approaching dust cloud down the creek and tugged desperately at his arm. "Come on!"

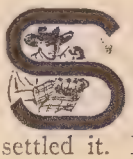
"Wait, ma'am. You don't know—"

"I know Clay Bryant," Lou said sharply. "Hurry!"

In his weakened condition, the man either had to go with her or take a header, so he went, swearing futilely at her stubbornness. Lou shoved him into a chair by the table and hurried to the window. One swift glance showed her the dim forms of four men who had pulled to a halt a quarter mile down the creek. It was too nearly dark to recognize them, but she could clearly visualize the smug grin on Clay Bryant's darkly handsome face as he saw that his quarry had stopped.

Apparently those four men had a healthy respect for this stranger, whoever he was, and didn't care to set themselves up as targets for his rifle. Still, given time, they would surround the house and then hell would pop for sure.

Lou Matthews knew very well that she had all the trouble she needed without sticking her perky nose into somebody else's, but she knew, too, that Clay Bryant, owner of the C B spread, could be as hard and unreasonable as a chunk of granite. She didn't like him. She hadn't liked him, in fact, even before he had informed her flatly that he was going to marry her.



HE whirled away from the window to find the stranger leaning his head weakly against one propped hand, and that settled it. Lou was definitely on his side of the argument.

"Take your jacket off," she ordered

He lifted a weary, questioning glance but didn't argue the point. While he was struggling with the jumper, Lou yanked open a cupboard drawer and pulled out a worn sheet, which she tossed on the table.

"You fix that leg while I'm gone," she told him.

"I will if I have time." He tried to grin, but pain twisted it all out of shape. "I'm glad you're gettin' out of here, miss. This isn't going to be any place for a lady."

Lou was hurriedly slipping into his denim jumper as she moved to the window for one more quick look. As she had figured,

the riders were starting to scatter, but she could still make it. Grabbing the hat off the stranger's head, she jammed it down over her long red curls, hastily shoving them all out of sight.

The man pushed himself out of the chair, holding to the table with one hand while he tried to reach her with the other. "What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"Give Clay somebody to chase. Sit down!" Lou accompanied her words with a hard shove that effectually carried out her order. "They won't hurt me if they do catch me."

"They'll kill you! Miss—"

"It's too dark for good shootin'. Now fix that leg and then make yourself scarce. Horses in the corral."

Lou said the last of it as she was dashing out the door, bent over and hobbling as if she were badly wounded. She heard the stranger's horrified shout and heard him staggering after her; but she reached the horse, climbed on him and spurred like the devil up the creek.

A high-pitched, furious yell and a sudden burst of shots told her that her ruse had worked. Clay Bryant and his three cowboys were hot on her trail, and she didn't have as long a head start as she could have wished. Not that she cared particularly if Clay did find out that she had foiled his plans for revenge, but it might sound sort of funny in the gossip circles—Lou Matthews kiting off up the country to help a man she didn't even know.

The big brown horse was tired and his stride was as choppy as a windswept lake, which meant that Lou, who couldn't begin to reach the stirrups, was all over the saddle. Which meant, too, that it was an uneven race. She could see right from the start that it was going to be but she stayed with it, kicking the horse recklessly off into the rough country and hoping that darkness would save her.

It didn't. She had covered four hectic miles when she heard a shout of triumph fearfully close behind her. Then a rifle bullet zinged past her cheek, and Lou hauled the horse to an abrupt stop and threw her hands into the air. At least, she thought smugly, she had given her stranger plenty of time to catch a fresh horse and lose himself in the darkness.

She couldn't restrain a shiver of apprehension as she heard the four horses plowing to a stop around her, but she kept her head lowered until she felt a sixgun rammed into her side. Then she looked up with a gasp, straight into Clay Bryant's glittering dark eyes.

"'Lo, Clay," she said and then swallowed twice in rapid succession.

One of the other men already had his rope down, which proved to Lou that if these men had caught her stranger, they'd have had him dangling from a tree in less time than it took to think about it. That, she felt, justified her action completely.

Clay's gun was lowering, but the glitter was still in his eyes and his lips were twisting in a furious snarl. "What the hell are you doin'?" he yelled.

"Ridin'," Lou said. Then she dragged in a deep breath and took the offensive. "You had no business buying into that fight."

"No business, hell!" Clay exploded. "He killed Frank!"

"That wasn't much loss," Lou said shortly. "Frank shouldn't have picked a fight with him."

Clay was getting madder by the minute. "What the hell did you expect him to do, hand out a bouquet of wild flowers? He ran onto that wolf head on and threw down on him, naturally. We took his trail and we'd have had him cold if you'd kept out of it. Lou, I could wallop the daylights out of you!"

Sometime during that last outburst, Lou began to feel slightly uncomfortable. She asked carefully, "Do you—know him?"

"Know him?" Clay bellowed. "You blockhead! That was Buck Preston!"

"Oh, no!" Lou gasped. "Are you sure?"

"You're damn right I'm sure! Damn it, Lou. We could have got him—made him tell where he's holdin' Billy!"

Lou's stomach turned completely over three times and then landed wrong side up. The man had said he knew her dad was not at home, which undoubtedly meant that he knew where he was and what he was doing. And Lou suddenly remembered how his eyes had sparkled when he denied being a member of Buck Preston's gang. He wasn't a member of the gang. He was Buck Preston himself!

"Oh my stars!" she breathed.

"How hard's he hit?" Clay demanded.

"Pretty hard. Let's go back, quick!"

Lou hauled the big brown around and kicked him into a run, but she knew it was hopeless. Buck Preston hadn't stayed alive this long by sitting around waiting for folks to come back after him.

ON THAT ride back to the ranch, Lou recalled everything she had ever heard about the man, and her smouldering hatred exploded into a white hot flame. He had become notorious as a deadly gunman two years ago as a result of a series of fights over in the Smoky Basin country. Then he had disappeared and most people figured he'd been killed.

No such luck. Lou gritted her teeth as she remembered the note her dad had found tacked to a pine tree after the first unexpected rustling raid here: *Compliments of Buck Preston.* Such reckless insolence fitted perfectly with the twinkle of deviltry in his eyes and that damnable, disarming grin. His later acts, bank robbery and now kidnapping, were both reckless and insolent but they were also downright ruthless.

Maybe, she thought savagely, *this* range was getting too hot, and he needed a big stake before moving on.

Black night had descended by the time they got back to the ranch. The house was dark, and Lou reined over for a look in the corral. By the dim starlight she could see that a blaze-faced sorrel, the fastest horse on the ranch, was gone.

"He pulled out," she said dully. "Clay, I'm sorry."

"That helps," he grunted and then sighed wearily. "We can't trail him tonight, but maybe we can pick up his track again in the morning."

"Yeah." Lou was so tired she could hardly sit up, but her conscience made her ask, "Want a piece of cake and a cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks, Lou. Reckon we better ride on into town, but I'll light the lamp for you."

Lou was glad enough to have him do it. Something drastic had happened to her confidence and her general outlook on life, and she felt miserably lonely. The three cowboys remained on their horses as she and Clay dismounted by the kitchen door and went inside. Later, after she had a cup of coffee and got her thoughts reorganized, she would turn the tired brown horse into the corral and throw him some hay. After all, it was not his fault.

Lou waited by the door while Clay felt his way to the table and struck a match. The lamp was barely flickering when she saw the scrap of paper tucked under the edge of the cake plate. She snatched it up, glaring for a moment at the big chunk missing out of her brand new chocolate cake before turning her eyes on the note.

This is an awful good cake, it said. *Are you by any chance looking for a husband?* It was signed, *Buck Preston.*

"Well, of all the—" Lou had to stop because she just simply didn't have the proper words in her vocabulary. "Look at that!" she cried, waving the note in front of Clay.

He did, and his mouth tightened grimly. "That skunk! 'Lou, are you afraid to stay here alone? He may come back."

"Let him," Lou said fiercely. "I'll take

the sidewinder apart so doggone quick—"

"You got a gun?"

"Yes."

She yanked open a cupboard drawer, pulled out a short-barrelled .38 and rammed it into her belt. Then she pulled off Buck's hat, slammed it onto a chair and slammed his jacket on top of it.

"I'll be all right," she added grimly.

"Well, honey, we'll go into town—"

"Don't honey me," Lou snapped, unable to control her distaste for this man even though she was still definitely on the defensive.

"I'll honey you," he said darkly, "and you'll learn to like it. I'm still going to marry you, but I'm going to cultivate some brains in your pretty head afterward!"

"Get out of here," Lou said, "or I'll use this gun on you."

He grinned, maddeningly sure of himself. "I got a lot of time," he drawled. "See you tomorrow, honey."

Lou closed the door emphatically after him, then crossed to the stove with a disheartened sigh. She kicked up the fire before lifting the ever-ready coffee pot to set it on the stove to heat up. One gentle swish of the pot told her that Buck Preston had helped himself to the coffee, too.

"That long-legged hellion," she muttered.

"Who, me?"

Lou dropped the coffee pot and whirled to find Buck Preston leaning companionably in the doorway to the living room, his thumbs hooked idly in his belt, his eyes twinkling at her.

"What—what are you doing here?" she gasped.

"Waitin' to be sure you got home all right. My gosh, woman, ain't you got no respect for your pretty neck?"

"I—" Lou's tongue jammed up on her. He was smiling at her with what looked suspiciously like pride, and again she felt the hard pull of his personality. "That sorrel," she began.

"He's in the barn. I thought maybe that black-headed gazebo would ride back with you, and I kinda wanted to know whether he was going to take my trail."

He started forward, walking slowly and half dragging his left leg, but he didn't seem aware of it. His eyes were fastened on her, and Lou felt as if she were suddenly hobbled. She tried to back up, ran into the stove and bounced away, jarring into a full awareness of reality. That was Buck Preston who was approaching her as if he had a right to!

Frantically she reached for the gun in her belt, but it hadn't even come free when he reached her, his big hand closing over hers and wrenching the gun away from her. His other hand clamped over her shoulder, and Lou began to shake like a sapling in a strong wind.

"You wouldn't shoot a man, would you?" he drawled. "After he'd stuck around to thank you for what you did for him?"

"You—you—" She gulped painfully. "Lying to me that way!"

"I didn't lie to you." He reached behind him to lay the gun on the table, then took hold of her other shoulder, his grip firm and yet gentle. "How could I be a member of Buck Preston's gang when he hasn't got a gang?"

"Been playing a lone hand, have you?" she said, striving futilely to get her breath. "What have you done to my brother?"

"Nothin'."

"Where is he?"

"Maybe after tonight I'll be able to tell you that."

"He's such a little tyke!" Lou cried, despairing over this man's cool indifference. "He's never done you any harm."

"That makes us even," he said imperturbably. "I haven't done him any harm either."

"But what if—" Lou choked. "What if Dad can't raise that money? Everybody's nearly broke!"

"Shucks, little lady, a lot of things can happen in twenty-four hours." He tugged at her gently, and Lou's knees turned to water. "You haven't answered my question."

"What—question?"

His eyes were no longer twinkling. They were looking right straight down into her.

"I asked you if you were by any chance lookin' for a husband."

His grip was tightening, drawing her inexorably closer, and his head was coming down. Lou tried three times to speak, but she couldn't even breathe. Then his lips closed over hers, gently at first as if feeling their way through the opposition, then with a hungry force that seemed to swallow Lou from her red head clear to her boots.

LOU lost track of time, ideas, even the floor. When he finally broke it off, her head fell back and she could only stare at him dazedly, wondering what in tarnation had happened to her.

"'Cause if you are," he said, quite as if that kiss hadn't intervened since his last statement, "I'm applyin' for the job."

Lou thought she detected a wistful light in his brown eyes, but she couldn't be sure before he released her and stepped back, turning abruptly toward the chair to pick up his hat and jacket. He set the hat at a cocky angle on his head and was elbowing into the jacket, his back to her, when Lou came alive.

With a trembling hand, she swept up the gun and pointed it at him. "Don't move," she said, trying to sound authoritative when her voice was trembling as badly as her hand was.

For a fleeting second he turned rigid. Then he swung leisurely to face her, straightening the collar of his jumper and eyeing her coolly.

"Better put that down," he drawled. "It might go off."

"It will go off if you try anything. You're going to take me to my brother!"

"No," he said. "I'm not."

"I'll make you!" Lou cried, suddenly furious. He was damnably unperturbed. "You'll take me to him or I'll shoot you where you stand!"

"That'd be an awful good way to make sure he never gets home," Buck said evenly. He dropped his hands to his sides, still eying her with that cool, speculative glance. "I don't believe," he added slowly, "that you'd shoot me anyhow, but here's your chance if you want to."

Deliberately he turned and strode to the door, pausing with his hand on the knob, his broad back forming a target she couldn't miss. He was daring her to do it, and Lou tried. She lifted the gun, cocking it with her left hand as she centered it between his shoulders, but she couldn't pull the trigger. Her arm began to shake uncontrollably, and gradually the gun tilted until it was pointing at the floor.

He turned his head, grinning at her over his shoulder, and Lou could see that his eyes were shining like a newly lit Christmas tree.

"I know you better than you know yourself, Redhead," he said softly, "and I haven't even started gettin' acquainted yet. I'll be seein' you."

With that he opened the door and stepped out into the darkness.

Lou Matthews listened to the sounds of Buck's horse fading out toward the east. What in the world was the matter with her anyway? She'd had Buck Preston right under her sights, just as she'd been wishing fervently for the last two days, and she'd let him ride off.

The man who had snatched her little brother! The man who was now figuring on taking twenty-thousand dollars away from her hard-working old dad as easily as he had taken that kiss from her!

Lou felt a shame roar up in her that scorched her eyebrows. Perhaps she had been justified in helping him escape from

Clay Bryant, because she hadn't known then who he was. Now she knew, and she knew, too, that she had to do something about it or she'd never be able to face her worried dad.

The moon was up now. Maybe she'd be able to trail Buck down, especially since his horse was too leg weary for fast traveling. Then she remembered suddenly that he had headed out toward the east, possibly on the trail to the C B ranch three miles distant. He knew Clay Bryant and his men had gone to town. Maybe . . .

Lou saved the rest of her speculations for later. Jamming the gun into her belt once more and grabbing a handful of matches, she dashed to the barn, threw a saddle on the sorrel and lit out on the trail to the C B. If she had guessed wrong, she would have a nice moonlight ride for nothing, but it was worth a chance.

And, she told herself grimly, if Buck Preston were at the C B, he wouldn't ride out from under her gun a second time. She had held her shot before because of that crack he'd made about Billy—she was sure of that now—but he wouldn't get away with that bluff a second time.

Lou stopped only once, in the bottom of a steep wash where a light would be shielded from view. Here she dismounted, struck a match and hurriedly scanned the trail. Then she shook out the match and climbed back on the sorrel with renewed determination.

One shod horse had gone over this trail in the last few minutes, traveling at a walk. She didn't know what Buck could be after at the C B—cattle, money or what—but it didn't matter. His plans were going to fall through, anyway.

Lou held her sorrel at a steady trot until she noticed a faint odor of dust lingering in the air. Then she pulled to a walk, knowing that she was getting too close to Buck Preston for comfort.

Also close to the C B. The ranch house stood facing down a low flattened ridge just beyond a brushy canyon, and as Lou approached the rim of that canyon, she stopped her horse and stood in the stirrups to peer over the top.

The house was utterly dark, but the yard was bathed in silvery moonlight, and Buck Preston's movements were as simple to follow as a railroad track.

He'd ridden up to the front of the house first, dismounted and tried the door. Evidently it was locked because he'd returned to his horse and led the animal around back, leaving him ground-tied in a thick stand of brush. Then he'd stepped up on the back porch, tried the door and finally disappeared through a window.

MAYBE, Lou thought, he was after grub, although she didn't see how he could be hungry after the hole he had made in her cake. Leaving the horse where he was, she climbed out of the canyon and scurried across the ranch yard, her gun gripped tightly in her cold right hand. Soundlessly she stepped up onto the porch, paused only long enough for a quick look into the kitchen, then crawled through the open window, crouching on her knees and listening for all she was worth.

She heard a board creak in the front part of the house and wondered if she should investigate, but decided immediately that she should not. Playing hide and seek in the dark was a game that Buck Preston was no doubt very good at. All right. She'd wait for him here and nab him when he tried to climb back out that window.

She did, however, move a little distance away from the window, hunkering down in deep shadow behind a chair and struggling futilely to control her tight breathing.

Then Buck appeared suddenly, moving into a bright patch of moonlight and stopping. He glanced around the kitchen uncertainly, then headed toward a door across the room. He had taken but three steps

(Continued on page 111)

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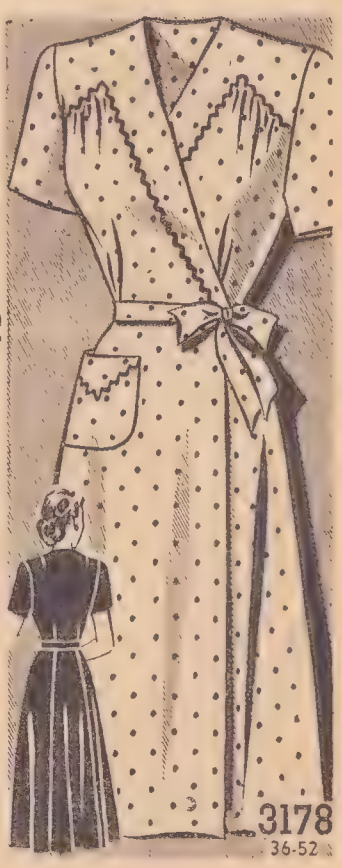

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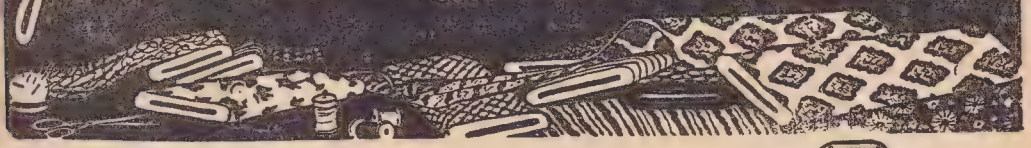

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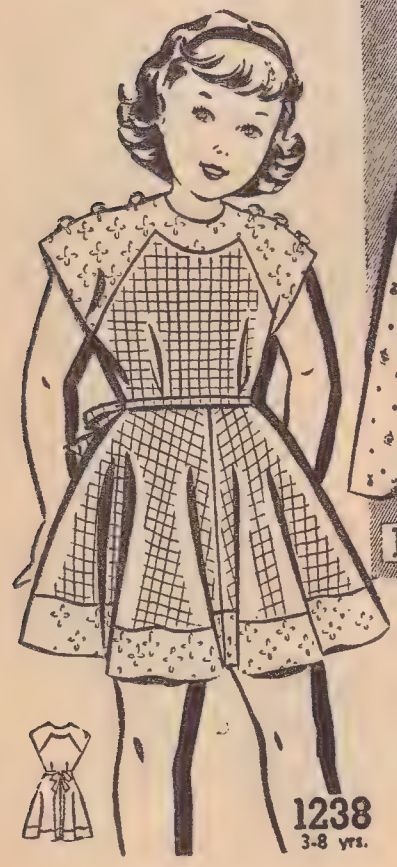

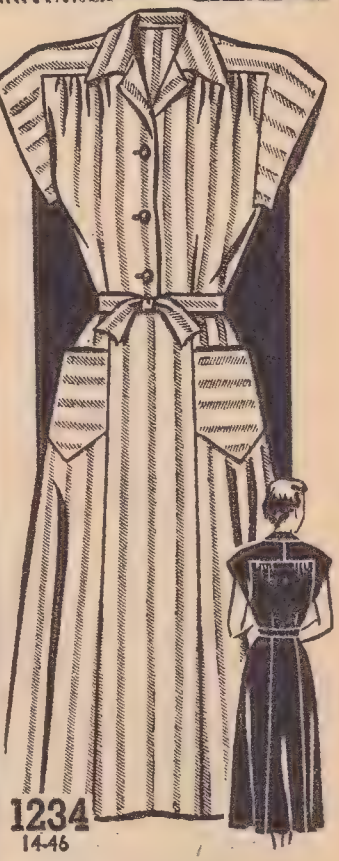

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TENDERFOOT!

By Thelma Knoles

This might be just a game of forfeits to Gene Cameron, but Timmie meant business.

CHAPTER ONE

Rope-Shy Ranny

TONIGHT, Timothea Scott thought, sitting with the Smoky Valley young folks on the wooden dance platform at the barbecue grounds—tonight for the first time Gene Cameron had treated her like one of the Valley girls instead of a dude here today and gone tomorrow. She hugged every precious moment of the evening to her, and wished that it would never end. The waning moon lit wistful dreams

in her wide, dove-gray eyes. She leaned closer to Gene, and the breeze tossed her gold-shot curls tantalizing close to his face.

"Ummm," he murmured. "First time I ever smelled wild roses in the fall."

Timmie colored, but before she could say anything, another girl spoke up.

"No fair teasing our dudes, Gene." The laughter was spiced with malice. "Especially out of season."

Timmie's cheeks burned hotter. Trust Peggy Hart to remind everyone that Timmie was outstaying all the other guests at the Wild Hart Ranch. Timmie swallowed and pretended she hadn't heard Peggy.

Deliberately she slanted a glance at Gene, allowed herself to admire his dark, strong profile, the warm brownness of his hair in the dancing firelight, the strong sweep of line from brow to cheek to square chin. She noted approvingly his long-legged grace as he sat Indian fashion beside her. Timmie sighed. She tilted her head back so that she could look up at the stars, winking, knowing sparks of starshine. She wished that the platform would take off through that star-pricked sky, carrying Gene and her far away from a world that tomorrow would be real and hard and lonely again.

"How about some games?" Clem Summers suggested hopefully. "Like Post Office or Winkum."

"Spin the Plate." It was Peggy, of course, who decided—Peggy with her small, pointed face gypsy bright in the firelight. She reached over to a packed basket and brought out a pie tin. As she moved to the center of the circle, her flashing dark glance crossed Timmie's and Timmie felt a twinge of apprehension. "Or do they play such simple games in the city?" Peggy asked.

"They play Spin the Plate everywhere, I guess." Timmie had to force the gaiety into her tone.

She was remembering that Spin the Plate called for forfeits. Also she was remembering Peggy's sharp sense of humor, and the many tales that were told about tricks—sometimes downright raw—played on trusting, ignorant tenderfeet. From the poplar grove where the horses were hitched, there came a sudden flurry of snorting and whinnying. Timmie started and then immediately tried to hide her nervousness. If Peggy Hart ever faintly suspected Timmie's shameful secret, Timmie was a gone goose.

"Reckon," said old Bronco Pete, coming forward to put a fresh log on the fire, "the hosses got a whiff of mountain lion."

Timmie relaxed with a grateful smile for the old cowhand. He alone knew how terrified Timmie was of horses—all horses, any horses. None of them looked harmless and gentle to Timmie. They were huge monsters with wicked-looking teeth and rolling eyes, full of sudden, violent whims that caused them to stamp and rear and paw the air with flashing hooves. Bronco Pete always mounted Timmie on the oldest, pokiest horse available. He had even provided her with a secret remedy for her panicky horse-fear.

"Ready!" called Peggy, and Timmie came to attention.

URE enough, Peggy spun the plate straight at Timmie. She would fumble it, Timmie was sure—and then would come that forfeit. She could see the mischievous sparkling in Peggy's dark eyes. But as Timmie grabbed for the twirling tin, a large brown hand shot in front of her.

"Reckon," Gene said pleasantly, "you aimed this for me, Peggy?" Perversely, the spinning plate hit a rough place on the floor and bounced out of his grasp, to wobble to a halt some yards away. Gene rose to his feet in a motion as fluidly graceful as a panther uncoiling. "Looks like I caught myself a forfeit right off."

The game progressed, and presently there was a good stack of forfeits—tobacco sacks, coins, pocket-knives, bracelets, earrings, handkerchiefs. It was Peggy, self-

"Oh, sure." Mrs. Hart broke open a hot biscuit. "But Gene's a wary young buck. He's got his sights set to build the Circle C up to a certain goal and there isn't anything going to sidetrack him." She shrugged plump shoulders. "Likely by that time Peggy'll be married and settled down. But in the meantime she won't let him alone." She gave Timmie a sudden warm smile. "I'm going to miss you, Timmie. Somehow I don't think of you just like the other guests. You seem different."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hart." Tears misted Timmie's eyes and she hastily began to spread jam on her biscuit. "This has seemed like home to me. You know I'm not really a—"

"Hey, Miss Timmie!" That was Bronco Pete bawling outside the window. "Shake a leg and get out here to the corral. You was asking what made some horses better than others, and I aim to show you right now, before Gene carries these new yearlings off."

"Run along, dear," Mrs. Hart said. "Those really are fine animals, I heard Jim say. Gene's going to take them up to his mountain pasture till after the round-up."

Timmie hurried out, thinking with a wry grin that again she'd been foiled in the attempt to explain that she was *not* a dude. Not a real one, anyway. She was a paying guest at the Wild Hart for these two months, all right, but she was really just a working girl, a school teacher, and not one of those wealthy city girls who spent their vacations at dude ranches. She had never been able to explain. From the first it had been assumed that she was another rich dude. Oh, well, it didn't really make any difference, for in ten days or so she'd be gone and forgotten by everyone in Smoky Valley.

Gene had the two young horses in a tough cedar-poled corral. The yearlings were young and frisky, with rippling muscles and hides like polished brown satin in the bright morning light. Timmie's heart took a great jump as she looked at Gene and heard his cordial greeting.

He was so much a part of the morning and the sun, and even the spirit of the magnificent young animals trotting around the corral, that the beauty of the picture brought a sweet pain to Timmie's heart. She had never dreamed a girl could love a man so after knowing him only a couple of months. But that deep glow in his eyes, that grin that spread like slow sunshine across his brown face, that dent of a dimple in the hardness of his cheek—all that spoke to her heart as though she'd known him for a long time, as though the recognition of a loved one were just waiting to be spoken.

Now he said to Jim Hart on the other side of the corral, "The Morgan blood sure predominates, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but all the horses from that outfit have been kept uniform. You can see the Thoroughbred and Quarter-Horse strain, too."

One of the horses gave a skittish little jump and Timmie backed away from the corral fence.

"How about trying them out?" Peggy asked, coming up to Timmie. "Aren't they darlings?"

Timmie stared speechlessly into the corral, at the nervously twitching ears and the proud lift of the young horses' heads. Her hands grew damp and cold.

"I'm sure Gene isn't in such a hurry that he can't let us try out the new horses, Dad," Peggy coaxed. "Timmie wants to as bad as I do."

There was a little smirk on Peggy's lips that told Timmie the other girl had become wise to her terror of the plunging, rearing beasts. Timmie looked desperately around for Bronco, but he was on the far side of the corral.

"My goodness," Peggy cried, "you're not *afraid* to ride those yearlings, Timmie?"

dried hay. Bronco Pete, alone on the high wagon seat, gathered up the reins, bit off a hefty chew of tobacco, and let out a whoop that started them off with a bounce.

Timmie sat beside Gene, both of them with their backs planted against the sideboard of the wagon. Peggy was on his other side, and Clem beyond Peggy. There was a hard glitter now in Peggy's dark eyes when her glance met Timmie's, and Timmie felt a glow of satisfaction. Peggy could have the title of wittiest—Timmie was content that Gene chose her as prettiest and bestowed his kiss on her.

"Be careful, Gene," Peggy said, her voice high above the creak and clatter of the wagon wheels, "or we'll have another heart-broken lady dude on our hands!"

Timmie bit her lip and Gene stopped rolling his cigarette. Around them the light chatter and singing was abruptly stilled.

Peggy went on relentlessly, "Remember that red-headed girl who was ready to make her pa buy the whole valley; if *you* went with the deal? And when you turned thumbs down on that, she offered to throw up her fortune and take a job as bookkeeper, horse-wrangler, cook, anything at all, on our ranch, so's to be near you, Gene?"

"You're exaggerating a mite," Gene said dryly.

"Not too much," Peggy said pertly. "And don't forget the school teacher over the ridge a couple years back. She was aimin' to put her brand on you any old way."

Gene flinched. He hastily finished rolling his cigarette and asked over Peggy's head, "Get any rain up in that West pasture yet, Clem?"

Peggy laughed. "No use changing the subject, Gene," she said. "I'm sure Timmie is interested in your conquests among the other visitors."

Timmie was silent. As the wagon bumped and creaked along, she took little part in the conversation or in the singing which soon commenced. Visitor. That's what she was and that's all she was. Just another summer visitor, soon to depart. Smoky Valley would go on just as though Timmie Scott had never been there. And if she weren't very careful—if she gave her the least opportunity—Peggy Hart would be telling someone else next year about the little dude from Los Angeles who fell head over heels for Gene Cameron just because he kissed her in a forfeit game.

CHAPTER TWO

No Dudes Wanted

NEXT morning Timmie, pretty as a morning glory in blue and white gingham, heard voices out at the corral. She looked out and recognized Gene in his cotton shirt and blue jeans, with a battered old Stetson riding far back on his brown head. He was dismounting from his big steeldust gelding and calling greetings to Jim Hart, who came out of the barn.

The front door slammed and Peggy came into view, tying a scarlet ribbon around her curls, looking trim and nicely curved in tight jeans and a boy's rodeo shirt.

"Looks like Gene got over bright and early to see the two yearlings Jim bought in town the other day," Mrs. Hart volunteered as Timmie went into the dining room. Her voice turned indulgent. "Trust that Peggy of mine to hot-foot it out there. Ching!" She raised her voice toward the swinging door into the kitchen. "Rustle more hot coffee muy pronto!"

When the old Chinese had shuffled in and out, Mrs. Hart glanced out the window again with a fond expression. "If that girl isn't a sight. Peggy never will be satisfied till Gene comes to heel. It's a matter of pride with her to add his scalp to her collection."

"They—they're very close friends, aren't they?" Timmie asked, her throat suddenly scratchy.

chosen to take the lead as a matter of habit, who elected to dole out the forfeits. As she knelt on the platform and Slim held the various objects over her head, she dealt out a string of penalties that had them all shouting with laughter. Peggy, with her bright eyes missing nothing, knew full well who her victim was in each case.

When Gene's gay yellow scarf—the last forfeit to be claimed—fluttered over Peggy's bent head, Timmie knew that Peggy caught that silken flutter, and she drew in her breath, wondering what forfeit Gene would draw.

Peggy chanted, "Bow before the wittiest, and kiss the prettiest."

As she finished, Peggy rose and moved back into her place in the circle. As though, Timmie thought, she wanted to be ready for Gene's choice.

Because there wasn't any doubt as to who was the prettiest in Smoky Valley. Only last month Peggy had easily walked away with the honor of being named Queen of the County Fair. Small and pert and cute as a blackbird, with shoulder-long dark curls and her lively black eyes, with her red, red mouth and little pointed face, Peggy had easily captured every beauty and popularity honor since she could sit a saddle. Already every eligible boy in the valley had proposed to Peggy—all but Gene Cameron of the Circle C Ranch just south of Peggy's own home, Wild Hart—and Gene was just waiting till his ranch was well started. So valley gossip ran. Timmie knew no reason to doubt it.

Now Gene swept the waiting circle with his deliberate gaze, and asked consideringly, "Which comes first?"

"The wittiest of course," came a prompt reply. "Always save the best till the last, cowboy."

"Then again, the same gal might be both," someone else said.

Peggy self-consciously fluffed out her dark curls, and her red lips curled into a smile.

"The wittiest?" Gene said musingly, and headed straight for Peggy.

Timmie shut her eyes, but she couldn't keep them shut, and so she opened them to see Gene make a low, sweeping bow. When he straightened up, she closed her eyes tight again, and this time she didn't mean to open them till the second part of the forfeit was over and she was sure Gene had sat down.

She heard his voice, directly in front of her. "And the prettiest," he said.

There was a bitten-off gasp from someone—probably Peggy. Then Timmie was caught lightly, surely, by her shoulders and lifted to her feet. Her eyes flew open and she had one quick glimpse of Gene's grinning face very close to hers. Then his mouth came down hers fairly and squarely.

The shock of it was sweet and exciting. In a flash Timmie thought how soon she'd be leaving Smoky Valley, how soon all this would be only a lovely, haunting dream, and she knew she must make the most of this moment. This might be just a game of forfeits to Gene Cameron, but Timmie meant business. This was likely the only kiss she'd ever receive from the man she loved.

So her lips turned soft and yielding and sweet, at the same time ardently responding to his. She was aware of the wild trembling that swept through her, of the mad drum of her blood through her veins and the eager aliveness that sent its message through her warm lips. For a glorious moment he held her close and the world fell away from them. They were no longer on the rough platform beside a dying campfire, surrounded by laughing, teasing friends. Alone they sailed away with the glimmering moon, cut a swirling path through the winking stars. . . .

And then the kiss was over and the party started breaking up. People were hustling about and bringing up the hay-wagon. They piled aboard, laughing and shouting as they settled themselves on the fragrant

Inside the corral Gene wheeled about to glance at the girls. From the tilt of his shoulders, the angle of his head, and the stillness of his big brown hands, Timmie knew he was listening and watching. In the little silence that fell it seemed the whole ranch—the whole valley—the whole Western world that she'd come to love so dearly—was waiting for Timmie's answer.

She was so afraid that her teeth shut together hard and her jaw ached. Under the tight blue gingham bodice her heart swelled and then shrank to a hard knot of pain.

She forced her jaws to unlock and said loudly, "I'll go change into riding things."

Then she turned and hurried up the path. It was dappled with the shadows of blooming hollyhocks, vibrant with the buzz of golden velvet bumble-bees, sweet with flower scent, but Timmie for once was insensitive to its beauty.

In her room she put on boots and jeans and a shirt. Then she went to her dresser, opened a red tobacco can and took from it two white tablets. They were small, round, white pills, very innocent-looking. But they wielded a magical power. They gave her confidence and bolstered her nerves.

Bronco Pete, wise in the ways of cows and horses and human critters as well, had recognized the flare of panic in Timmie's eyes when she first faced the riding horses at the Wild Hart stable. She had given him a grateful smile when he crooned in her ear, "Steady, sis. I'm putting you on old Nellie. She's just like sitting in a rocking chair. You just sort of slump and let Nellie take care of things."

That evening Pete sought Timmie out and gave her the pills. Nothing that would harm a baby, Pete said. Just an old remedy made up from a recipe his pa got off an Indian medicine man. It didn't do a thing but calm the nerves and slow down the heart so's a person could relax and handle hisself without breaking out like a runaway bronc.

"Just pop one into your mouth," he told Timmie, "and let things take their course."

"Is it a drug?" Timmie asked. "Or some kind of sleeping medicine?"

"It ain't a drug," Bronco stated positively. "As to sleeping—I ain't never heard of it being used thataway. But it's a fact that it will take nine-tenths of the panic out of you. Most of that's just in your head anyhow, sis."

"I'm sure of that," Timmie agreed shamefacedly.

She swallowed a tablet under Bronco's keen eyes the next time she prepared to ride, and sure enough she found that she was able to get through it without half the choking terror she'd first experienced. She decided that the pills really were some kind of sedative.

Now Timmie hastily popped a pill into her mouth. And then another. They couldn't hurt her, Bronco insisted. Heaven knew she needed help right now.

REINFORCED somewhat, Timmie went back to the corral. If it weren't for Gene's being there, she'd never in all her life try to ride one of those skittish yearlings. But, she reflected miserably, she might as well have her neck broken quickly as her heart broken by slow degrees.

She reached the corral just as two strangers rode up.

"Just a couple of drifting waddies looking for roundup work," Peggy announced as her dad withdrew to the barn with the men. She dismissed them with a shrug. "A couple of hombres who wouldn't be caught working for an honest dollar unless they were pretty desperate, if *I'm* any judge."

No one disputed Peggy's judgment, and Timmie, with a cold, plunging heart, got ready for her ordeal. She saw with relief that only one of the young horses was saddled.

"Don't be a meanie, Gene," Peggy was coaxing. "I know Timmie is as crazy as

I am to ride these colts. Just a little ride? To the mailbox and back. Aren't you just crazy to ride one, Timmie?"

"Crazy all right," muttered Timmie, regarding with glazed eyes the fierce rebellion in the large rolling eyes of the nearest yearling.

"Not today," Gene said firmly. He looked with exasperated indulgence down at Peggy. "You hair-brained loco gal, maybe they're not even saddlebroke good. I'll ride one up to the pasture and lead the other."

"Timmie's not afraid, are you, Timmie?" Peggy persisted.

In that split second Timmie forgot everything but the mockery in Peggy's voice. Or maybe it was the effect of the two pills she'd taken. Anyhow she cried out recklessly, "Well, what're we waiting for?"

She thrust her boot-toe into the stirrup of the saddled horse and started to swing into the saddle. The horse shied violently, snorting and rearing. For a nightmare second Timmie's toe hung in the stirrup and her leg was jerked skyward. She lost her footing and her head snapped backward.

Then her boot jerked free. She landed with a thud, not on the hard ground, but in strong, bracing arms. She was lifted swiftly back and away, held safe out of harm's reach. Dimly she heard the rat-tat-tat of hooves on the hard-packed ground and a reassuring, "Whoa, there, boy!" from old Bronco Pete.

"Ohhh. . . ." sighed Timmie and collapsed against Gene's shoulder.

It was very cozy and pleasant there. Timmie's head rested snugly on the curve of Gene's arm. She felt wrapped in protection, in blessed tenderness, cradled with warmth and affection. She let her eyes stay closed.

Then voices gathered around her—Peggy's sharp with annoyance, "Oh, for goodness' sake, why all the fuss?" Bronco Pete's twang, "She was mighty eager to ride that cayuse." Gene's mild, "She was headin' for a nasty bump."

Reluctantly Timmie opened her eyes. "Got your breath back?" There was such warm sympathy, such genuine understanding in Gene's voice that Timmie could have turned her face into his shirt and wept out her happiness and love.

Instead she said shakily, "I'm all right. Th-thanks for catching me."

"It was a downright pleasure." Gene carefully set her on her feet. "Just let me know when and we'll run through it again."

Timmie flushed. But he wasn't making fun of her, she knew. He was just trying to put her at ease.

"Even a tenderfoot dude," said Peggy, "shouldn't have been caught and thrown that way." She stared suspiciously at Timmie.

For once Timmie didn't bridle at being labeled a tenderfoot. She was looking at Gene with her heart in her eyes.

"I'll ride a piece with you, Gene," Peggy declared. "Bronco, help me throw a saddle on Diablo. He's handy."

"Peggy, you stay clear of Diablo!" shouted Jim Hart from the door of the barn as Peggy moved toward the blue roan in the far corner of the corral. "That roan is the oneriest critter we have around here. Unpredictable as the weather. Mild as milk one time and hell on hooves the next. Don't know why I keep him."

"I'll ride him some day!" Peggy yelled. Pete was already throwing a saddle over Peggy's own spirited black mare and she impatiently jerked the cinch tight. "Let's hit the trail, cowboy," she called to Gene.

Watching them ride away together, Timmie bit her lip to keep it steady. Peggy and Gene seemed to belong to the country and to each other in a way that shut Timmie out. Feeling forlorn and deserted, she drooped against the corral fence.

It went that way for all of round-up week. Despite the warmth of Gene's voice when he had held her in his arms that

morning at the corral, he seemed to keep a deliberate distance between himself and Timmie from then on, though since he and Jim Hart and two other ranchers were working cattle together Gene was often about the place. He acted as if he thought a bright-eyed, sweet-scented young dude might be a dangerous distraction for a serious young rancher.

Timmie couldn't get him alone long enough to explain that she was after all only a schoolmarm on vacation—one who'd shot her little wad and was now about to start back to the city and her job. Meantime Peggy was getting downright outspoken about hinting that the season for dudes was over. Indeed, there was a snap in the air of a morning and evening that matched the chill growing in Timmie's heart.

CHAPTER THREE

Corralful of Trouble

THE last afternoon of the round-up, the two girls rode out to watch the wind-up of the big job. Though she still longed to protest when the branding irons brought a squeal from a calf, and the odor of singed hide made her wince, Timmie was rapidly getting used to it.

There was a powerful excitement in the activity that turned the sodded prairie into a churning dust bowl, in the shouts of the men and the darting of nimble, sure-footed cowponies, in the order that came out of seemingly aimless, milling confusion. Timmie knew clear down to her dusty little boot-toes that she could become a part of this world, that she too could do her bit in this strenuous life. If only it could be at Gene Cameron's side.

She could and did love him just as dearly when his eyes were reddened by dust and wind and his brown hair powdered gray-white, as when he was sleek and barbered and handsomely dressed for a Valley dance. She loved the rich ring of his voice, the swing of his powerfully-muscled body as he rode from one group to another. And most of all she loved the way his glance immediately found her when he rode up to where she and Peggy had dismounted under a live-oak tree.

"Isn't this all pretty rough for you?" he asked Timmie. There was something almost hostile in his tone—something Timmie couldn't understand.

"N-no," she denied. "This isn't too rough for me."

"Well, anyhow, you'll have a picture of real ranch work to take back home with you."

"I haven't left yet," Timmie said a bit shortly. Then, with a desperate effort at humor, "Maybe I'll turn rancher myself."

"Oh?" Peggy echoed. "Going to buy?" She threw Gene a mocking look. "Remember that little red-headed dude, Gene?"

"Peggy," Gene said quickly, "I think Ray Parker wants to see you. Over there with the Bent Arrow bunch. Suppose you vamoose."

She vamoosed, taking her sweet time, swaggering along in her close-fitting jeans in a way that made Timmie's boot-toe itch.

"So you're leaving Smoky Valley," Gene said.

Why did he have to rub it in like salt in a barbed-wire scratch? Anger painted Timmie's cheeks deep pink and put a quick shine in her eyes.

"Yes," she said. "Though I must admit I'm a bit disappointed. I'd been led to believe a girl could expect a little more excitement out here."

"Yeah? What brand of excitement in particular?"

There was an edge to his tone that sent Timmie's heart to thudding. Oh, well, what had she to lose? What had being sincere and sweet and ladylike got her?

"Well," she said, deliberately letting her red lips pout a bit and her lashes half hide

the silver brilliance of her eyes, "I wasn't referring to roping, riding and wrangling. Or—" her voice took on a challenging lilt and her lashes swept up and then down again—"or Spin the Plate!"

Just then a dust cloud boiled up and around them. Timmie ducked and came up hard against a flannel shirt front. Her head was jerked back so that she looked into a hard brown face whose lips were smiling but whose dark eyes were not.

"I'm right sorry our games don't measure up to your ideas of excitement," Gene said roughly. "Maybe this will, though."

Timmie saw him through the blur of boiling dust—gritty dust that made her eyes sting and her lips open for breath. Then he was holding her crushingly tight while his mouth closed on hers. The bawls of cattle, the shouts of the cowboys, the smell of branding irons and burning mesquite roots were swirled away. The dust cloud turned to pure gold, beating, tingling, sifting through the girl, awakening every nerve in her pliant body, answering the hunger that consumed her heart.

"Adios, little dude," she thought Gene said before he kissed her again.

This kiss was more gentle, was almost wistful and regretful, with all the sweetness of a dream relinquished. Timmie melted under it, her lips warm and soft as sun-drenched poppies, her arms clinging around Gene's shoulders. Then the breeze, blowing from over the hill now and clear of dust, was cool on her flushed face and she was standing alone.

Gene slapped his battered sombrero back on his head. He looked away from Timmie, staring intently at the cowboys hazing the last squalling calf.

"Reckon I'd better check on those lazy jugheads Jim signed up extra. That Blacky and Slim are about the poorest excuses of roundup hands we ever took on."

He strode away and Timmie sat down. Rather, her knees folded under her and she dropped weakly down onto the ground. The breeze still came from over the hill, cleanly sweet with the perfume of sun-dried grass. It lifted Timmie's hair from her neck, fanned her hot cheeks.

"Wake up, gal," Bronco Pete's voice brought her out of her gaze. "I said, can you keep something under yore lid?"

"You mean a secret?" Timmie brought her attention to the old cowhand. "Why, I—I think so."

"I wasn't exactly eavesdropping," Pete began, settling back on his heels and speaking in a low voice. "But I'd dropped down in the shade under that big low-growin' mesquite yonder to splice a rein that was wearin' thin, and I didn't see no call to jump up and holler when Miss Peggy led them two sidewinders, Blacky and Slim, around there for a little palaver."

"Well? Timmie asked.

"Listen, gal," Bronc said.

Timmie listened, at first unbelieving and then angry. Peggy, it seemed, planned to speed the departing guest—or make sure she *did* depart—by staging a fake kidnapping to scare Timmie out of her boots. She had hired the two drifting waddies to pull the trick, promising to take all the blame, and telling them that Timmie would enjoy it all hugely—later.

"Growing up the way Miss Peggy has, she has kind of a hard sense of humor," Bronco Pete explained. "And such jokes—rawhiding greenhorns—is quite common in these parts, you savvy. But I figure it would do that young'un good if you got the last laugh on her someway."

Timmie's eyes darkened from dove-gray to metallic steel, and her chin set stubbornly as she got madder by the second. She thanked the old cowhand, and assured him that she'd be on the watch.

"It'll likely be sometime tomorrow," Pete warned her. "Cause those two drifters'll be riding on soon as they get paid off. And tomorrow most of the hands and Jim will be busy making arrangements for shipping the cattle."

EXT day was dead quiet around the ranch. The ranchers who'd taken part in the roundup were at Gene's Circle C, the nearest headquarters to the herd of cattle being held for shipment. Mrs. Hart had left to help an ailing neighbor and wouldn't be home for a couple of days. There was only old Ching in the kitchen, and the two girls in the big cool adobe house.

Desolately Timmie set about packing, and so the long day passed. Though Timmie was nervously alert for signs from Peggy of her intention to pull the practical joke designed to scare her guest into high-tailing it away from Smoky Valley, Peggy seemed content to chat about the coming rodeo and stock show in the early spring. Ching served the girls an early supper, shivering and rolling his eyes at the low growls of thunder that threatened a stormy twilight.

"Poor old Ching," Peg looked after the fat old Chinese with affectionate exasperation. "The first clap of thunder will send him cowering under his bed till all sounds of the storm have rolled over."

"I guess it isn't funny to him," Timmie said.

Just as being so ridiculously afraid of horses wasn't funny to her. She looked at Peggy, so bright-eyed and assured, and wondered if Peggy was ever afraid of anything. Timmie doubted it.

"Shucks," Peggy said now. "Most of this storm is going to miss us. Mostly fireworks anyhow." Just then the heavens split in two with a dazzling slash of lightning and a deafening crash of thunder. "Well, that takes care of Ching for the evening."

The girls went out on the porch to watch the splatter of rain that hit the dust of the yard and bounced up in silver pellets like buckshot. Peggy was right, the rain had no more than settled the dust than it was over. The thunder still roared and lightning forked the sky, but the heaviest part of the storm had been caught by the mountains to the south.

"This would be a good time to walk down to the spring and see the evening primroses come out," Peggy said with such sudden animation that Timmie glanced at her with quick suspicion. "You really don't want to miss that, Timmie, and you won't have many more chances, you know."

That's right, thought Timmie, go on rubbing it in. She remembered Pete's warning, but a feeling of hopeless recklessness surged over her. What did it matter if she fell in with Peggy's plans? Who cared what happened to her anyhow? She was just a dude trying to hang around after her welcome wore out. And maybe, being forewarned, she *could* turn the tables on Peggy and have the last laugh after all—bitter satisfaction though it would be.

"All right," she said with forced cheerfulness. "But I'm going to put on boots and jeans. There was enough rain to soak the grass and weeds."

"Hurry." Peggy as usual was already wearing levis and polished half-boots. "It'll be dark before we know it." She glanced down toward the thick stand of willows along the banks of the spring.

As Timmie changed clothes, she found herself wishing grimly that she had a gun. She wouldn't need to have it loaded, but if, when Peggy tried to sic her phony kidnappers on Timmie, she could draw a nasty-looking little pistol from some place of concealment, what a satisfaction it would be! Ready, slim and trim in artfully tailored blue jeans and a rust-colored silk shirt, she stood and looked around the room.

Her glance fell on the tobacco can that held the pills old Bronco Pete had given her. Her own secret weapon of defense. She tucked them into a pocket. Maybe there'd be a chance to use those tonight. Maybe some smart-aleck waddies who weren't above taking a bribe to help scare

a girl to death, would feel very foolish if they took an unplanned siesta.

The blazing crimson and gold and purple of fading storm clouds splashed with sunset color were rapidly taking on grayed tones, and a clear, sweet evening stillness wrapped the world like a lullaby when the two girls walked down toward the spring.

"That low hill and mesa above the stream is just covered with primroses," Peggy said. "Both the flat white kind and the big bushes with the yellow blossoms." She stopped ahead of Timmie as they followed the narrowing trail into the willow thicket. "We'd better go single file here."

Timmie followed, listening intently for any strange sound from the thick bushes. Suddenly there it was—a sharp rustle, a gruff command. Peggy, a yard ahead of Timmie, gave a gasping little scream.

"Hold on, miss! Don't get to stampeding around and nothin'll hurt you."

The gruff tones resolved into a command as Timmie almost bumped into the man blocking the trail. Peggy was standing still. A second man stepped out of the screening willows into the path, and even if she had not been expecting them, Timmie would have recognized Blacky and Slim in spite of bandanas tied about their faces. Yet, even knowing that this was only a practical joke, Timmie's knees were alarmingly weak and her heart racing up into her throat. The way the men stood, the way they spoke, seemed to hold genuine menace.

"What's the idea?" Peggy demanded. "Is this a holdup? If it is you're making a big mistake. Neither of us has anything of value on us, have we, Timmie?" Now she turned to Timmie and Timmie saw that Peggy's eyes were sharp as a squirrel's, watching for the panic that she expected in Timmie's face.

"No, miss," growled Blacky through his bandana. "This ain't a holdup. We'd just

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like to have one of you young ladies take a little pasear with us. No harm intended, ma'am."

"Oh!" Peggy gasped. "You mean this is a *kidnapping?*"

Slim said impatiently, "Let's can the gab. There ain't no one around this place now, but you can't tell when someone'll ride up. We'd better hit the trail."

"Come along quiet, miss," Blacky said, taking hold of Peggy's arm. "We got to vamoose outta here. We'll talk later."

Peggy jerked her arm free. "Listen, you long-eared jackass," she said sharply, "you don't want *me!*" Her glance shot to Timmie, standing wide-eyed and watching. "I mean, this is no way to joke!"

Blacky seized her arm again. "No one's jokin', miss. We're serious to the tune of about ten thousand bucks. Savvy? Now, come along quick and quiet-like. We won't hurt you none, and if everything goes smooth you'll be home by tomorrow night."

Peggy dug her toes into the leafy soil. She jerked her head toward Timmie. "I tell you you big jugheads are making a mistake. *She's* the dude—"

"We savvy about her all right," Blacky broke in. "But you're the gal we want. We figure this ranch is sure good for ten thousand ransom and we *ain't* sure about her. Savvy?" He swung around to Timmie. "Now, listen, miss, and get this straight. When the folks come back, you tell 'em to leave the money—ten thousand dollars—in the Bent Arrow mailbox just at sundown tomorrow night. There's a long, straight stretch of road there, and we can see plain if there's any monkey-business. We want old man Hart, alone, to bring the money. Tell him if he wants his daughter back that's the terms."

"Timmie!" Peggy shrieked. "Don't let them do this! Go get—"

"She ain't a-goin' nowhere," Slim said curtly. "There ain't no ridin' horses handy but one wild cayuse, and we got it from

good sources that the leetle lady is plumb scared loco of horses anyhow." He flung a last command at Timmie. "The only way you can help out is by giving my message to Hart when he gets home."

Though she was sputtering incredulous protests, Peggy was hustled away. A few minutes later there came the sound of creaking leather and thudding hoofbeats from the other side of the yellow thicket. Timmie let out a shaky breath.

CHAPTER FOUR

Halter-Broke

PEGGY had fallen into her own trap. Only it wasn't a practical joke any more. It was real, with hard cash as the prize and Peggy Hart as the pawn. Timmie turned and ran to the house. The two desperadoes just thought everyone had gone. Ching must still be cowering under his bed, since faint rumblings of thunder still threatened.

"What the hell?" he mumbled when Timmie routed him out. "I leave this damn country come payday. I find place where old man live nice and peaceful. I—"

Timmie breathlessly interrupted his tirade. She told him what had happened. "You ride over to Gene Cameron's ranch right away, Ching, so they can get on the trail of those kidnappers."

"What trail, missy?" Ching asked wisely. "Those fellers ride down the river way. No trail, I think, by the time help come."

"Well, anyhow," Timmie urged impatiently, "ride after help. You do ride, don't you?"

"Sure," Ching agreed. "I ride my burro. He back of barn right now. I go catch-'em."

"Oh, Ching! It'll take forever on that pokey old burro."

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Ching shook his head. "Only horse in two-three miles of house is that blue devil in corral. Only loco fool get on Diablo."

"Still," Timmy argued, following Ching toward the barn, "if someone *could* follow those two right now they might not lose the trail. It shouldn't be so hard to do—they feel absolutely safe."

"Mebbe so," Ching agreed.

They were at the corral now. Timmie looked at the blue roan quietly standing in the corner. The roan raised his head, pricked his ears, and gave them a welcoming leer. Timmie remembered Mr. Hart saying that Diablo wasn't really impossible to ride. Just unpredictable, and he knew when a rider was uncertain or frightened and took wicked delight in throwing him off.

"Ching," Timmie said, "help me saddle Diablo."

"You crazy, missy?"

"Yes."

Without too much trouble they got the blue roan saddled. When Timmie was ready to mount, Diablo deliberately turned his head and surveyed her. Timmie read cold amusement in the rolling eyes, the curled-back lip.

She stepped close to the horse's head. "Listen, you four-footed fiend," she said earnestly, "there's no use in trying to fool you. I'm scared witless and you know it, but I'm going to ride you. I'm going to ride you if it kills me. Savvy?"

Diablo snorted his derision. Timmie snapped around, placed her boot-toe in the stirrup and landed lightly in the saddle. Ching threw her the reins and jumped back. Diablo snorted again and shook his head. Timmie pulled the reins tight, settled herself firmly.

"Hit the trail, you wall-eyed brute!" she cried, and reined him sharply around. She dug her heels into his flanks before he knew what was happening. "Make tracks!"

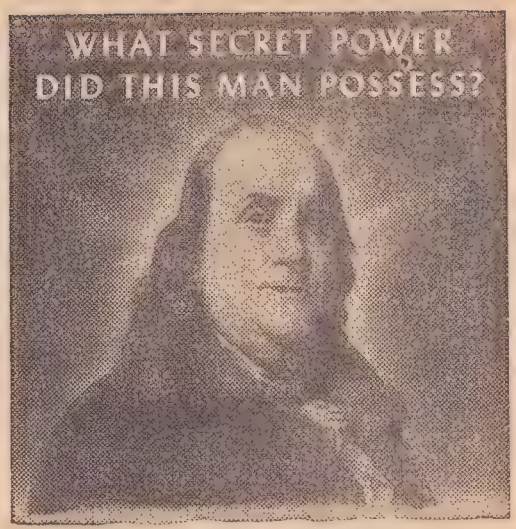
Diablo lined out smartly. He was forced

to slow to a walk at the willow thicket, but by this time the moon was up almost full and very bright. Timmie kept a tight rein. She sat tense, so tense that her neck ached till she forcibly relaxed, but she remained alert, ready to do battle with the temperamental blue roan at the first sight of fractiousness on his part. It must have been that he wanted a moonlight ride that evening, for though he occasionally snorted, and showed a tendency to toe dance when a crooked stick lay across his path, he seemed to accept the fact that Timmie wasn't going to scare easily.

Soon they were jogging along at a speedy trot, paralleling the river which was shallow and innocent-appearing along here, but which Timmie knew was pitted with shifting beds of quicksand that would prevent the two kidnappers ahead of her from taking their horses across. Timmie kept Diablo at a fast pace, and finally rounded a bend where she saw signs that the horses had entered the water. She turned Diablo into the silver ripples. It was narrow enough so that she could see fresh deep tracks in the mud where three horses had emerged some hundred yards downstream.

Timmie figured that Blacky and Slim would think themselves safe from close pursuit, since their muddy tracks would soon be filled up. They'd likely ease up on their horses now. She promptly urged Diablo into a lope, stopping before rounding every bluff or thick clump of bushes to listen for sounds ahead. Finally, from the far side of a thick stand of geasewood and giant mesquite, she heard voices.

Timmie dismounted. She led Diablo to one side of the trail and behind the dark shelter of a huge rearing boulder where she tied him to a tough sapling. Then she cautiously made her way through the brush. As she slipped as quietly as she could between the matted growth, she caught a flare of light ahead. She crept to the fringe of concealing bushes and looked out.



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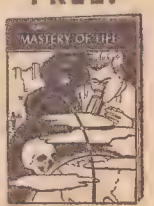

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Blacky and Slim were hunkered down by a campfire.

"Reckon now we can take on a little grub," Blacky was saying. "Might as well take it easy."

Peggy spoke up from her seat on the ground. "You'll have plenty of time to relax where you'll be put for this crime!"

Blacky laughed. "Right cute little spitfire, ain't you?" He set three tin cups on a flat rock. "Smart, too. The more Slim and I thought about your plan to kidnap the lady dude, the more we liked it. Figured to scare the hide off that little gal, didn't you? With Slim and me taking our twenty-five bucks apiece and fading away, after bringing her back to the ranch. You had it all fixed up so pretty. No one around the ranch. And we'd leave you tied up all snug and helpless. Well, ma'am, it was just too pretty a idea to waste on a joke."

"You f-fools," Peggy quavered. "Wait till my pa gets you."

"He won't get us, sis," Slim said cockily. "The border's too handy. Blacky and I figured on staying a spell in Mexico anyhow, way down in the interior, and we can use a bankroll right handy." He set the coffee pot out on the rock. "Soon as that's settled a mite it'll be ready."

Timmie backed silently away. She looked around till she located the three horses hobbled in a patch of grass. Then she picked up a good solid piece of dead mesquite, took aim and threw it toward the horses. They squealed and thrashed around, causing a satisfactory commotion.

Both Slim and Blacky jumped and ran to their hobbled mounts. Crouching low, Timmie darted out of the brush. She flipped up the lid of the coffee pot and emptied her tobacco can of pills into the steaming liquid. Then she fled back to the brush.

"Can't savvy what spooked them critters so bad," Blacky was grumbling as the men came back to the fire.

Slim glanced nervously over his shoul-

der. "Maybe a puma is sneaking around." He reached for the coffee pot. "This'll go good."

Peggy, her eyes stretched wide and dark in her pale face, refused the cup they offered her. Blacky shrugged indifferently. "Can't say we ain't trying to be good to you."

They drank deeply of the coffee. Timmie watched expectantly from the shadows. How long would it take the sedative to work on two such tough characters as these? She also wondered a bit uneasily if she'd given them enough to kill them. She didn't think so. Just enough to put them to sleep till help came.

The men drained their cups, poured more. Rolled smokes. Lounged against their saddles and talked about their plans when they had the ransom money and were deep in Mexico. Finally Slim gave a mighty yawn, and Timmie leaned forward hopefully. That was her undoing. Her boot came down on a dry twig that snapped with a sharp report. She hastily stepped back, slid on a turning stone, lost her balance and sat down with all the quiet and grace of a cow on a frozen pond.

As she hit the ground, there was a whistling sound over her head, the crash of gunfire and a bellow from the edge of the brush. Timmie threw herself flat.

"Got him!" yelled Blacky.

Then Slim's startled voice close at hand. "Him, hell! It's the other girl!"

TIMMIE rolled over and pushed herself into a sitting position. The outlaw leaned over her. "You're not hurt, miss? Here, get into the light." He hauled her to her feet and dragged her forward.

"I'm not hurt," Timmie gasped. "Let go of me."

She shook herself free and stood in the firelight. "Guess my little scheme backfired same as yours," she said to the star-

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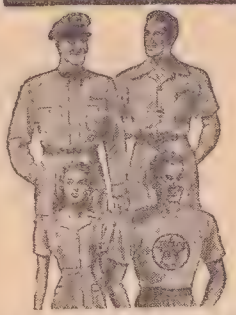

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tled Peggy, who for once had nothing to say. Timmie brushed twigs from her clothing and glared at the coffee pot. "I don't understand it."

"Listen, gal," Blacky said breathing hard, "how'd you follow us?"

"Horseback."

"But—" Peggy protested, "the only horse at the house was Diablo, and Pa won't even let *me* ride him. You couldn't ride Diablo, Timmie!"

"I rode Diablo," Timmie stated grimly.

"Just make yourself at home," Peggy said bleakly. Then with an effort, "I'm sorry, Timmie. It's all my fault."

"We better lie low and rest for a spell like we figured," Blacky decided. "No use in getting too far away from the ranch." Then in sudden concern, "But with this gal lighting out after us, how's Jim Hart going to get our message and know where to leave the money?"

"I left a note," Timmie lied.

It was no use to keep track of the passing time, Timmie realized, as she and Peggy sat by the dying fire under the watchful eyes of their guards. It could have been several hours later or much less than that when a quiet voice spoke from the thicket.

"Reach, boys!" It was Gene Cameron speaking. "We got you covered every way."

Blacky and Slim jumped to their feet with startled oaths. Blacky made a move toward his holster but thought better of it when Gene and Bronco Pete, backed by two Circle C hands, stepped into the firelight.

That was the end of the kidnapping adventure. Blacky and Slim came up with a pat story of Peggy's having hired them for the kidnapping as a joke.

"Why, you lyin' double-crossing coyotes!" Peggy yelled. "I wouldn't hire you to kidnap *me!*"

"We understood you wanted to see if the other gal had the guts to saddle a hoss and follow," Slim declared.

"My pa'll never believe that!" Peggy said. "Where is he anyhow?"

"He'd left for Tucson from my place before Ching showed up," Gene explained. "We'll take these two lobos to the sheriff, of course, but. . . ." He left the outcome hanging in doubt. His glance resting on Peggy's flushed, furious face was wooden. "Kind of a rough trick, wasn't it?"

"I wanted to give Timmie something to remember about Smoky Valley," Peggy said defiantly. "I aimed—"

"You aimed to scare the living daylights out of her," Gene cut in evenly. He turned away from Peggy. "Ching tells me, Timmie, that you lit out from the ranch on Diablo." His voice was stern. "Looks like you haven't any more brains than Peggy. That horse can be the meanest, most treacherous—"

"So what!" flared Timmie. "I'm sick and tired of being booted around here! So I was afraid of horses—well, what of it? I was trying to get over it." She pointed an accusing finger at Bronco Pete. "You old humbug! Those pills you gave me are nothing but candy. Give me confidence, relax me, indeed!"

"Didn't they help you thataway?" Pete asked mildly.

Timmie dismissed him with a scathing glance. She turned back to Gene. "So I fell in love with—with your ornery, sunblistered, wind-torn old country and was fool enough to give myself away every time I opened my mouth. So I didn't want to leave and everyone knew it. You'd think it was a crime!"

"Timmie—" Gene tried to break in.

"Wait," she cut him off. "And while we're talking, I'm *not* a rich dude—never was. My little fling was on a few hundred dollars I inherited. I work for my living—teaching school. And I'll be glad to get back to my little brats!" Unexpectedly she choked up. "I was f-foolish enough to think people would like me for what I was out

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here, and that I could somehow make my way and stay on. Well—" she whirled toward Peggy, "you don't need to hire any more desperados to drive me out. I'll go and I'll stay. I'll v-vamoose right now."

Blinded by the tears she could hold back no longer, she turned and plunged through the willow thicket. She ran stumbling along till she reached Diablo. As she worked with helpless desperation at the knotted reins, she heard the crunch of a bootsole on dry grass. Her hands froze on the reins.

"Timmie, you keep clear of Diablo." Gene's voice sounded shaken. He took the reins from her hands and drew her away. "Don't let me ever catch you around this cayuse again, no matter how good a rider you get to be!"

Timmie stared at him. "Why?"

"Why?" he barked. " 'Cause you're too precious to risk. When Ching said you'd ridden off on Diablo, it shot my world higher'n if a cyclone hit. Right then I knew that dude or not, and regardless of my plans for the Circle C, I—I—" He stumbled to a halt.

"Timmie," he said desperately, "Timmie, is there any way a thick-headed, no-account beef rancher could persuade you to stay on in this onery country till he had a chance to court you properly?"

Timmie smiled at him with eyes washed silver soft by tears.

Suddenly a mighty good way to keep her here occurred to him. His arms closed warmly around her and he placed his claim squarely on her lips. The response he received assurred him that that was about the surest way possible to keep Timmie happy in Smoky Valley for keeps.

A little way off Diablo snorted loudly. Dimly Timmie heard him. If her lips hadn't been so busy, she would have smiled, for she knew she would never be very much afraid of any horse again.

THE END

(Continued from page 87)

when he stopped short, putting all his weight on his good leg and bouncing up and down on it as if testing a board. Abruptly he dropped to his knees and began feeling over the floor with both hands.

Lou clearly heard his grunt of satisfaction, just before a board creaked protestingly, and a trap door opened up under his hands. Lou's eyes popped. She hadn't known about that trap door leading to a cellar, but Buck evidently had known that Clay had something of value on the place and just kept looking until he found the likely hiding place. Without another sound he let himself over the edge and disappeared into the hole.

Lou's first thought was to slam the trap door and move the stove over on top of it, but curiosity got the best of her. Soundlessly she crossed the floor on her hands and knees and was almost to the hole when a light flashed down below and a sharp voice said, "Freeze, cowboy!"

That was Clay Bryant's voice! Lou had started to rise in relief when she heard Buck's answer.

"I'm froze, cow-thief."

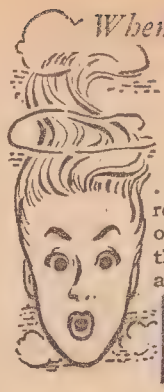
"I knew you were on to us," Clay said, his voice hard.

"I see my hunch was right," Buck said dryly.

"Yeah, but it won't do you any good. I thought you were dead when I borrowed your name for my business, but this time I'll *know* you're dead. Get his gun, Shorty."

Lou hadn't had a breath for the past five minutes, but this was no time to drag one in. Flattening out on her stomach, she peered over the edge of the hole to see Buck standing at the foot of the ladder with his hands raised as the cowboy Shorty advanced toward him. Clay and his other two men stood back in the shadows with guns in their hands. Then she saw Billy huddled in a corner, gagged, blind-folded and tied.

Quickly she flashed a look at Buck, just



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*Elip—spells PILE backwards!

in time to see him go into action. As Shorty extended his arm, Buck moved with incredible speed, grabbing the arm and jerking the little cowboy in front of him. The next moment the cellar was rocking to the crash of guns.

Lou saw Clay Bryant go down as if he'd been clubbed. One of the cowboys with him spun partially around, tripped and fell headlong. Then Shorty and Buck went down in a heap with Buck on top, fully exposed to the fourth man.

Lou didn't give herself time to think. She just lifted her little .38, aimed it in the general direction of that fourth cowboy and started blazing away. She heard his wild curse, saw him duck instinctively. Then Buck rolled off Shorty, his gun coming up and crashing, and the fight was over.

By the time Lou got down the ladder, Buck had the gag and the blindfold off Billy and was cutting the rope. Lou saw the boy was all right but something else wasn't, quite.

"Do you mind telling me," she demanded of Buck, "just what you've been doing in this country besides letting people think you were robbing them when you weren't?"

"Tryin' to clear my name. You see, I'd sort of—retired—and was punchin' cows when I heard about this business. So I went to the authorities and persuaded 'em that I'd been credited with a lot of things I didn't do. They said if I could prove it to 'em, they'd clear my record."

Lou pulled in a deep breath, held it while she took a good look at the future and then said, "I make an awful good witness."

"Yeah, but I got other plans for you." He stood up and reached for her, pulling her up within good kissing distance, then pausing. "You ready to answer my question yet or do you want persuadin'?"

Lou had the answer, all right, but that persuadin' . . .

"Both," she said.

(Continued from page 12)

studying Russian finding a place on your Pony Express?

I am 5 ft. 9 in. tall, weigh 160 lbs., have blue eyes, brown hair and am 20 years old. It is my honest opinion that the mail sergeant doesn't know my name, so how about enlightening him, somebody? I am terribly anxious to receive letters and will go so far as to accept them in *Francais, Deutsch* or *Русскии.*

My main hobby is flying and I have a private pilot's license. I promise to answer all letters, even if I wear out my dictionaries doing it.

Cpl. CHRIS OSBORNE
Co. A., 6th Plt.
Russian Language School
Presidio of Monterey
Monterey, Calif.

We'll be back on March 5th with more letter-hungry pen pals. If you'd like your letter published under the Pony Express brand, send it to Pony Express, c/o RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York.

Until next time—adios, amigos.

The September PIN-UP GIRL Limerick Contest . . .

Rub-a-dub-dub, sagehen and a tub,
This dinner belle's pealin' for chow;
So come on, cowboy, bring on the grub—
Here's your best chance for a frau!

was won by Pat Thompson, Alma Center, Wisconsin.

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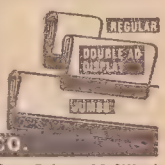

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It reveals why drugs and medicines give only temporary relief and fail to remove the causes of the trouble; explains a proven specialized non-surgical, non-medical treatment which has proven successful for the past 33 years.

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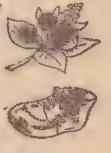

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Policy Pays for a Day, a Week, a Month, a Year—*just as long as necessary for you to be hospitalized!*

JUST LOOK
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The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your $1.00 a month!

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Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays $50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

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In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
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3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY
for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS $100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of $50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

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Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

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You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and with policyholders in every state. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

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Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

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Address.....

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SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
Assets of $13,188,604.16 as of January 1, 1951
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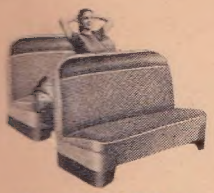
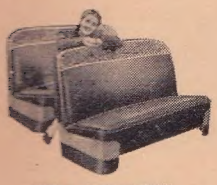
"The PACEMAKER"



"The CONTINENTAL"

"The STREAMLINER"



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SALESMEN JAMMING POCKETS WITH $10 BILLS!

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You've seen the big color advertisements in Saturday Evening Post and other big national magazines on the new seat cover sensation—miracle SARAN, the plastic that is impervious to dirt and stains. Now Key dealers are offering it in the sensational new BLACK EBONY design, beautiful beyond description. Another Key exclusive pattern in SARAN—the plastic woven like cloth with the color permanently "locked" right into each thread. Car owners everywhere are demanding BLACK EBONY Satin Saran Seat Covers! Every car owner you show them to is thrilled at the gleaming black and silver grey stripe, with the glossy black quilted Plastic trim. And this is only one of eight new seat cover sensations you can now offer at prices car owners will find hard to believe! No wonder salesmen are making money hand over fist with this amazing new line!

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